New Testament
Toaru Majutsu no Index 5

November. The season of the giant cultural festival known as the Ichihanaransai has arrived.

And amid it all, Kamijou Touma has finally returned to Academy City. After his anti-Gremlin expedition opposing that organization caused by World War 3 which began in Russia, he has finally returned to his heartwarming and peaceful everyday life with Index and Misaka Mikoto...or so Kamijou Touma hoped. But the appearance of an unexpected person has caused that hope to vanish into thin air! Who is this ultimate "rival" that has appeared before him?

Hamazura Shiage races around Academy City as the guardian of Fremea, who has a habit of getting herself lost, Accelerator is back to his usual self of getting angry at having to look after Last Order, and Mugino Shizuri the Level 5 is making some home cooking as a part of her rehabilitation... The New Testament Series charges into a new development with Academy City as its stage!

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Kamachi Kazuma

A crane! I often see them on the top of buildings that are under construction, but I have never once seen them being transported in pieces. It is just one of those close-to-home mysteries.

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Heavy Object Series (6 Books Total)
The Zashiki Warashi of Intellectual Village
A Simple Survey
The Circumstances Leading to Waltraute's Marriage

Illustrator: Haimura Kiyotaka

I am slowly drawing in the back country of Hiroshima.

カバー／暁印刷

新約

とある魔術の禁書目録

インデックス

5

鎌池和馬
イラスト／
はいむらきよたか

“So this is that idiot’s high school...”

Level 5 of Academy City’s Tokiwadai Middle School

Misaka Mikoto

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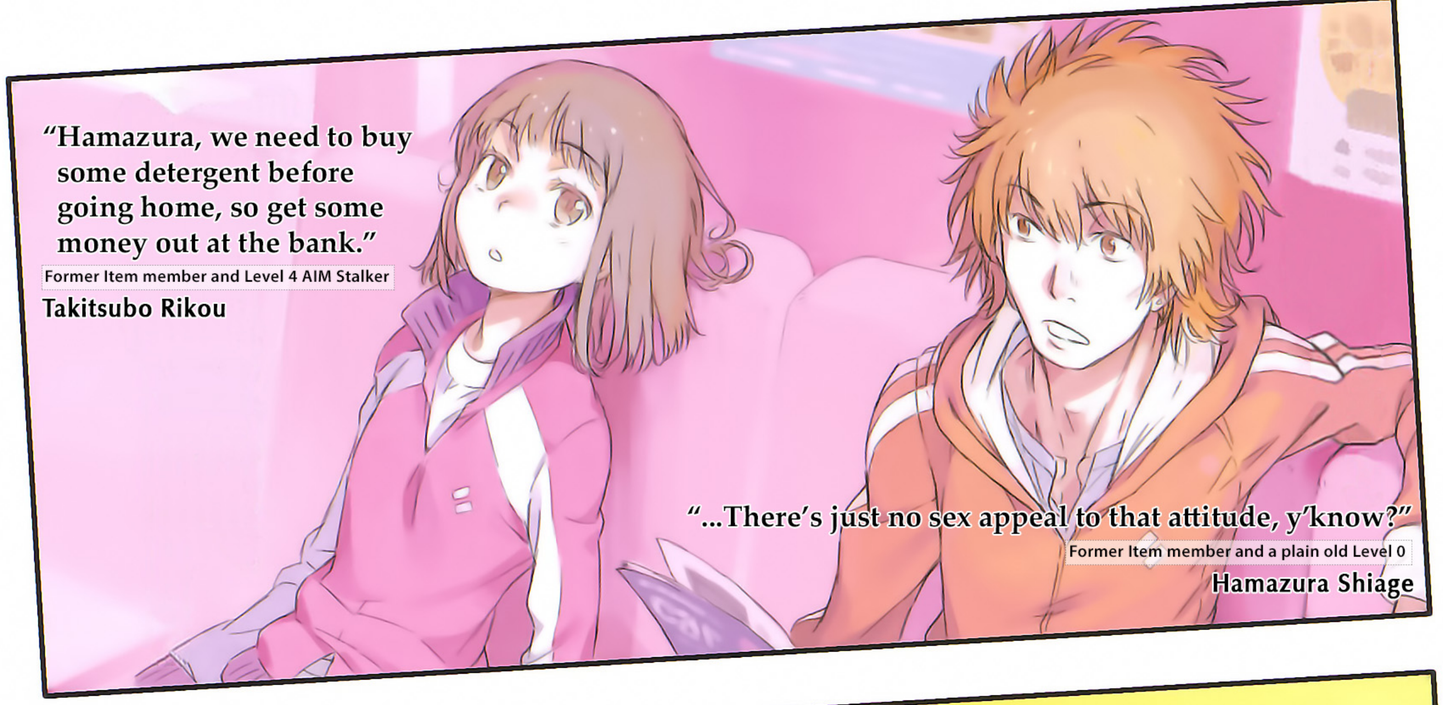
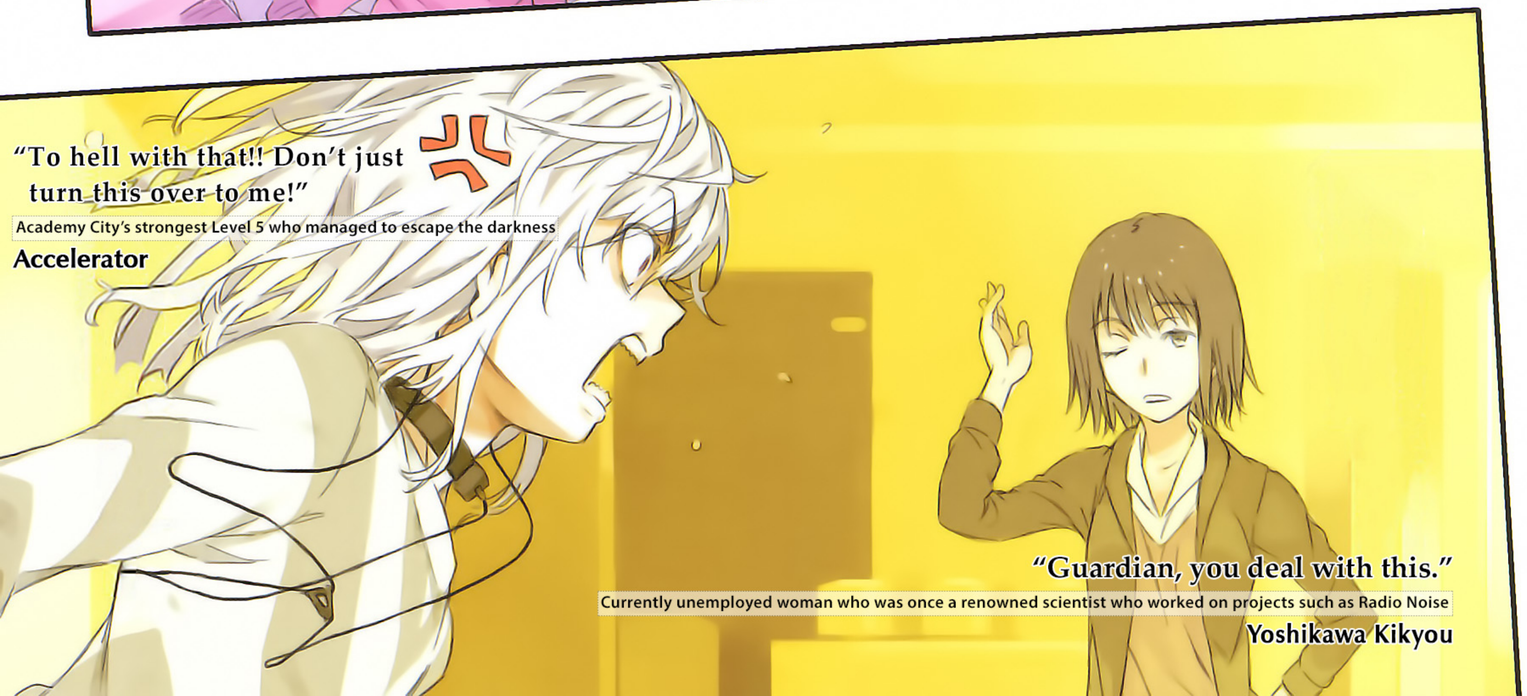
"…Friends?"

Person who appeared while Academy City prepares for the Ichihanaransai

Mysterious Woman

Designed by **H**irokazu **W**atanabe(2725 Inc.)


"Hamazura, we need to buy some detergent before going home, so get some money out at the bank."
Former Item member and Level 4 AIM Stalker
Takitsubo Rikou
"...There's just no sex appeal to that attitude, y'know?"
Former Item member and a plain old Level 0
Hamazura Shiage


"To hell with that!! Don't just turn this over to me!"
Academy City's strongest Level 5 who managed to escape the darkness
Accelerator
"Guardian, you deal with this."
Currently unemployed woman who was once a renowned scientist who worked on projects such as Radio Noise
Yoshikawa Kikyou

"Anyway, Kamijou. You are definitely staying over tonight. After all the time you've skipped out on, it's only natural."
Girl who is Kamijou's classmate and possesses the "Anti-Kamijou Attribute"
Fukiyose Seiri
"Ehh!? So when do I get to go back to my dorm!?"
Level 0 student of Academy City
Kamijou Touma

"Hey. It's about time we spoke. About the secret of Imagine Breaker... or rather, its very identity."
Magician who should have become a Magic God
Ollerus
"My enemy certainly has become pathetic."
Combat-specialized magician known as the representative combat member even within Gremlin
Thor
"Unyah... Nope. I just can't work up any motivation..."
Member of Gremlin, the organization that is a fusion of science and magic
Marian Slingeneyer

TOARU MAJUTSU NO INDEX NEW TESTAMENT

新約

とある魔術の禁書目録

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5

KAMACHI KAZUMA
鎌池和馬
イラスト・はいむらきよたか
HAIMURA KIYOTAKA

デザイン・渡邊宏一（2725 Inc.）

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PROLOGUE

The Greatest Proposition.

Question_01.

The November sky above was blue.

It was mid-November, the time when the season of changing leaves was drawing to a close; midday was wrapped in a pleasant coolness and breakfast brought on a sharp chill.

A plaza in Academy City's District 7 had several trees planted along its edges. Their branches still had a few yellow-tinged ginkgo leaves on them. Because the Ichihanaransai, a giant cultural festival that every school within Academy City participated in was underway, there were even more people moving about than on the weekend. However, it seemed this area was not the destination for the vast majority of those people. They were either passing through on their way from one place to another or were using it as a meet-up point before heading to their destination.

It was a sunny afternoon.

The absolutely clear sky seemed to stretch up forever, befitting the chilly outdoor temperature.

"Touma, what have you been doing all this time?"

A girl named Index was standing in a tall, daunting pose amid it all.

She was looking at a spiky-haired boy named Kamijou Touma who was sitting in seiza style on the plaza ground.

Kamijou Touma had an unpleasant sweat coming from his body and his eyes were darting about every which way but toward Index.

"W-well… Kamijou-san had various circumstances to deal with. After the incident at the Hawaiian Islands, I headed to Baggage City in Eastern Europe. I ran into some trouble there and things only got worse when I ran into a Magic God and someone who should have become a Magic God…"

"Oh?"

The girl's voice was completely flat. There was no range to her tone at all and the air was filled with the tension of two gunmen facing off in a Western. The strained atmosphere made it painfully clear that the slightest noise could set off a shower of bloodshed.

"Well, I will ask for the details later. But, Touma, there is one question I would like answered first. May I ask it?"

"Wh-What would that be, Index-san?"

When Kamijou nodded, the girl named Index pointed at his face.

No.

Technically, she pointed directly behind him.

"*Who exactly is that girl clinging to your back, Touma!?*"

He now had no choice but to explain it.

He had to explain what had occurred during the Ichihanaransai!!!!

CHAPTER 1

All of a Sudden, It Begins.

Open_the_Festival.

Part 1

Kamijou Touma woke up on a bench in front of the station.

"?"

He frowned at the sound of a train he could hear through the clear November air, sat up, and looked around. A familiar Academy City station lay before him. The people walking by paid him no heed. He was just a part of the Academy City scenery and all he could see was more of the Academy City scenery.

And...

Kamijou Touma had no idea how or why he had ended up in such a familiar place.

(...Huh? I remember heading to Baggage City in Eastern Europe after dealing with the incident on the Hawaiian Islands, but what happened after that???)

He remembered up to having his right hand crushed by the eyepatch girl who seemed to lead Gremlin, but what had happened after that? He tried to remember, but it was buried under the static of pain and terror. His mind was still feeling a bit hazy, so it was possible he would be able to remember more clearly later.

But the bizarreness of the situation gradually caught up to him.

That uneasy feeling stabbed into him along with the chilly wind and seemed to slip in under his skin.

Someone must have brought him here from Baggage City.

That was almost certainly true. But doing so could not have been easy.

Baggage City in Eastern Europe and Japan in the Far East were almost on the complete opposite sides of the world. Getting something as suspicious as an unconscious boy across national borders would have been extremely difficult.

Also…

Kamijou was inside Academy City. That city was protected by security of a different sort from the country of Japan. A few groups of magicians had snuck into the city in the past, but could they have done so as easily if they were carrying an unconscious boy with them?

And yet someone had clearly done so.

Someone had carried Kamijou Touma halfway around the world and then disappeared without a trace.

"…"

He thought for a bit.

(Fiamma of the Right. And…Ollerus was it? Was it them!?)

He looked around frantically, but saw nothing but the familiar scenery of Academy City and the usual boys and girls walking past. He saw no sign of the magician who had once brought about World War III and shaken the planet earth and the human race, or the man who had apparently gone even further.

Suddenly, he heard a footstep.

In that crowded area, that sort of human noise should not have stood out. And yet that noise slipped directly into Kamijou's ears and stabbed into his brain like it was a drop of water falling from the ceiling deep in a cave. Something cold ran down his spine. The noise had come from directly behind him. Someone was approaching from behind the bench he had been sleeping on.

Who was it?

Was it Fiamma of the Right?

Was it the man named Ollerus?

As previously stated, carrying Kamijou Touma to Academy City had to have been difficult. Since they had done so anyways, they must have had a reason that made it worth all that effort. And that reason would not necessarily be something carried out in secret.

Kamijou silently clenched his right fist.

Once his fist was clenched hard as a rock, he slowly, slowly turned around.

And he found…

“Huh? Fukiyose?”

It was Fukiyose Seiri, his (large-breasted) classmate who had long, black hair that showed off her forehead. The high school girl wore the long-sleeved sailor uniform that was their school’s winter uniform, and she held a large plastic bag in each hand. The bags were not filled with food from a supermarket or convenience store. Instead, they seemed to have supplies such as stationery and tools.

Kamijou frowned.

“Why are you here? And what are you doing?”

“…What am I doing?” said Fukiyose, starting in a low voice. “You’re the one that has completely skipped out on the preparations for the Ichihanaransai, Kamijou Toumaaa

Part 2

The room was eerily clean and was enveloped in the smell of disinfecting alcohol. It contained a special chair that could electronically recline and various tools were laid out upon work tables to the left and right of the chair. The tools were about the size of ball point pens. However, those metal tools that gave off a silver gleam would never be found for sale in a convenience store. The tips had either sharp points, small mirrors, or something like a circular file that could shave away hard objects with motorized power.

They were all professional tools that would make anyone tremble if they knew what they were for.

They all gave extreme pain on a level it was doubtful a single person among a hundred you asked would claim they could withstand.

“Let me tell you something first,” whispered a man who wore a special outfit similar to a white coat but made of a water resistant material like a raincoat. His hair was completely hidden by a plastic cap and he wore a large mask over his face, so you could not tell what he looked like. And yet the way he had his body so thoroughly covered told what kind of person he was and what he intended to do more than any facial expression could have.

“There is no use in trying to endure. This is not something that can be overcome by effort or guts. It is your own fault that you have been brought here. You ignored our warnings. I’m sorry to say it, but we can no longer go easy on you,” said the man with eyes more inhuman than a security camera. “Please understand your situation here. Struggling will get you nowhere and resistance will only prolong the pain. The best option for you is to simply give in. If you do that, it will all be over much more quickly.”

A blonde girl of about 8 sat atop the special chair that could electronically recline. Two or three other men and women dressed just like the man surrounded the girl. As she “lay” on the completely reclined chair, they stared down at her expressionlessly.

“Ah…ah…”

She let out a bit of a moan, but their expressions did not change in the slightest.

They were professionals.

And therefore they would not hold back even though they knew just how much pain they were about to cause. They knew that holding back due to emotions would only lead to a more horrible fate.

“Do you understand, Fremea Seivelun? If so, we will begin. I hope you will regret the actions you have taken up to this point.”

The girl's mouth was forced open and the sharp points of the tools were brought inside.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

♦

When Hamazura Shiage heard that soprano scream from within the dentist waiting room, he looked up from the supplied motor racing magazine that was worn out from having been read countless times. The front wall had a handmade poster saying "Healthy teeth for good little boys and girls. Don't forget to brush your teeth before going to bed!!"

He casually spoke to Takitsubo Rikou, the girl in a pink track suit sitting next to him.

"I think dentistry is the only occupation in Japan where you get praised for making little girls cry."

"...Aren't there a few others? Like haunted houses and Namahage."

"Do you get paid for those?"

Fremea was undergoing surgery in her mouth because she had stubbornly ignored Hamazura and Takitsubo's warnings and continued to drink a glass of hot chocolate before going to bed each night. As she was only 8, these were probably still her baby teeth, but they were not yet at the stage where they would begin to come out.

Both the cavities themselves and the treatment seemed like unnecessary pain to Hamazura.

Part 3

"U-um... As your teacher, I do find these repeated absences to be a real problem, Kamijou-chan. In fact, this has reached the point where homework and supplementary lessons can't cover it all."

"Underhood."

"Now keeping in mind that high school attendance is not compulsory, we still need to think about how you are going to recover from this. And I also want to know what kind of problems you are facing, Kamijou-chan."

"Uhherhooh..."

“But first, I need to ask why you look so beat up, Kamijou-chan! Did you stick your face into a hornet’s nest!?”

The person shouting within a normal high school hallway was Tsukuyomi Komoe, a mini-sized female teacher who was only 135 cm tall. A bit earlier, Kamijou Touma had been paraded around the city by his classmate Fukiyose Seiri with his hands bound behind his back with duct tape. Due to his bound hands, he had been unable to catch himself when he tripped over a bump in the road. His face had fallen right into a very soft and protruding portion of her upper body and…well, you get the picture.

Fukiyose Seiri had opened the classroom’s sliding door, shoved Kamijou inside, and said, “Here, I caught a fugitive.”

After that announcement, she headed off to her own station.

The classroom looked nothing like it did during normal classes. All of the desks had been pushed to the back and a number of large sheets of plywood and tools were lined up in the empty space that left. Fukiyose had mentioned making a stand, but Kamijou did not see a constructed building block-like object. Instead, construction seemed to have stopped at the stage of creating the large panels.

Those panels would be brought out once the Ichihanaransai began and put together into the stand. This was simply because there was a chance an aggressive group would destroy the stand during the night if it was brought out the day before. The kind of person that broke windows for no real reason would love to destroy a stand like that. In a city of 2.3 million with an 80% student population, those types of small troubles were rather common.

Tsuchimikado Motoharu and Aogami Pierce approached Kamijou who looked something like an earthworm.

However, they showed no real desire to remove the duct tape.

“What do you think, Kami-yan? Isn’t a café or a haunted house the standard for a cultural festival? Y’know, something with a cosplay aspect to it!! There’s nothing fun about a takoyaki stand! It would just be too unbalanced to have the girls cook takoyaki while dressed like maids!! That would just be off the charts on the ridiculous meter!!”

“And apparently we aren’t having a schoolgirl beauty contest either. There’s no swimsuits, no embarrassed girls, no nothing. What happened? What happened to the culture of the cultural festival?”

Kamijou had a feeling the festival was not about the culture of maids and swimsuits, but he knew those two would never listen.

He twisted his bound wrists several times in an attempt to wear away the adhesive bit by bit.

“The Ichihanaransai is an internal event, right? It’s basically an open campus where people can try out schools they’re interested in. The teachers are keeping an eye on everything to make sure it functions as a large-scale commercial for the school. In other words, we’re being closely watched. We can’t go too nuts in what we do, right?”

“You fool!! They’re having a beauty contest at nearby Eiri High School!! With swimsuits and everything!! And they’re allowing outsiders to take part, so there’s a rumor going around that Kumokawa-senpai will be taking part!!”

“And we’re in high school now!! Our level of freedom during the Ichihanaransai is on a whole other level from middle school!! Don’t you want to take the next step on the sexy path that we are only allowed as high schoolers!?”

“Fine, fine!! I suppose that’s the only real driving force for teenage boys!!”

Prisoner Kamijou Touma finally confessed. What they needed was to draw in as many people from outside the school as possible. To do that, they needed something that would draw attention. But if they simply went with what the adults felt was appropriate for a cultural festival, the area would be completely deserted.

Aogami Pierce held up his index finger and said, “It’s still not too late. I think we should have the girls working at the stand wear swimsuits!!”

“Swimsuits are great, but that’s hardly the place for them. They would get burned from the oil. Komoe-sensei would be left with a mountain of written apologies to make.”

“Then how about we punish any girl who accidentally burns the takoyaki by having her stand in front with egg white and mayonnaise all over her face?”

“I doubt that would make as great a sight as you’re imagining. It would just be sticky and nasty. It would be more grotesque than anything. The idea that a bit of whipped cream on the cheek makes a girl look seductive is nothing but an illusion.”

“What is with your negative thinking!? And what’s wrong with illusions!? Are you at a rebellious age where you claim victory after shooting down everyone else’s ideas!?”

Aogami Pierce tried to heartlessly beat up his classmate whose hands were bound behind his back, but Kamijou Touma, the wild beast of the concrete jungle, charged at the other boy and bit into his side. Tsuchimikado Motoharu began performing calculations even more precise than those for atmospheric reentry in order to determine what angle of entry into that fray would get him thrown out onto some of the girls in the classroom.

That was when the usual Ichihanaransai committee member, Fukiyose Seiri, exploded.

“Stop thaaa

It was up to each person's individual personality whether that made things difficult or if it made it worth putting in a real effort.

At any rate…

"Anyway, Kamijou. You are definitely staying over tonight. After all the time you've skipped out on, it's only natural," announced the great detective Fukiyose-sama.

Kamijou let out a Munch-like scream.

"Ehh!? So when do I get to go back to my dorm!? If she finds out I'm back in Academy City but haven't gone back to my room, Index will be really pissed!!"

Gamemaster Fukiyose paid him no heed and kept the situation progressing. Her first command after freeing Kamijou from his duct tape bonds was to acquire food. It was around noon. Normally, they would have used the school cafeteria, but it was apparently nearly impossible to acquire enough food for all of their classmates in that battlefield-like facility. Heading out and buying sale-priced supermarket bentos or cup noodles in bulk would be better, but information of that sort of "safe oasis" would quickly arrive at the other schools. Once that happened, those areas would not be as bad as the school cafeteria but they would still become the sites of small skirmishes.

"You need to keep each individual meal under 200 yen. And if possible include some vegetables such as a salad. Got it?"

"If you upped that to 300 yen, we could manage the mid-sized gyudon course. We live in an age where even a standard hamburger with nothing on it costs more than 100 yen when you add in the tax."

"Calculate it out using the nutritional information. For example, the sale price for Kiritaya extra-large gyudon is 380 each. But that clearly has more than double the normal size. If we split each one between two people, it fits within the budget. Everyone is checking the local shopping sites with their phones, so you will end up in conflicts with other schools if you simply search for somewhere with cheap single-portion food."

"If we're going to buy a lot, can't we just call ahead to the store? They should be more flexible if we're buying in large portions."

"If they allowed that, the restaurants here and there would be swamped simply with the amount they have to make ahead of time. Eighty percent of this city's 2.3 million people are darting about looking for the exact same kinds of food at this exact same time." Fukiyose narrowed her eyes as she explained. "I will give you the money, but don't you dare come back telling me you had the misfortune to trip and it got washed down a drain."

"…Unfortunately, I can make no guarantees about that."

"The money is in a waterproof envelope. I will put my GPS-equipped phone in with it. Is that enough?"

Kamijou would have to carry food for a few dozen people, so merely hanging shopping bags over his arms was not going to cut it. He brought out a small cart meant for the work in the school and headed out.

Even if the festival was still in the preparation phase, everyone seemed restless no matter where he went. He saw a lot of students around because it was about time for lunch. Others like him who had been tasked with procuring food were running about.

(Less than 200 yen each with some vegetables included, hm? Some type of sandwich would be my best bet. But the individually packaged convenience store sandwiches are out. Maybe I should check out some of the horrible places that target gluttons. Just like with books, those places get a cheaper price on their ingredients by buying them in higher than normal quantities. The burden on the customer has an inverse relationship with the portions. By dividing up things from there, I should be able to satisfy everyone in the class.)

Kamijou preferred to cook for himself, so his very first idea was that it would be cheapest to just make the food himself. However, he had to feed a few dozen people. It would be difficult to make that much on his own.

Kamijou was not skilled enough to make food in a bathtub-like pot without burning it and making enough food for a few dozen people with normal cooking tools would take hours.

(I always thought of eating out as simply being too strongly flavored and too expensive, but I guess they have their own kind of professional spirit.)

After thinking everything over carefully, Kamijou headed toward a large sandwich shop.

But suddenly he got the feeling he had overlooked something he could not afford to overlook.

"…"

Kamijou came to a stop. The restless atmosphere characteristic of Ichihanaransai preparations surrounded him just as before. Even if it was a peculiar or even "strange" atmosphere, it was still a good one. However, there was *something* large enough to blow that atmosphere away. Kamijou was convinced of it.

The problem was…

That *something* did not radiate killing intent like a drawn Japanese sword. It was completely blended in and perfectly adapted. That was why everyone overlooked it. Even though this *large something* was incredibly dangerous and carelessly approaching it would lead to certain doom.

The Hawaiian Islands. Baggage City.

Gremlin.

The darkness of the darkness that had spread to the very depths of the world.

There was *something* there that was just as, if not more, concentrated than that. Having sensed that threat, Kamijou remained still and slowly looked around in all 360 degrees. He carefully observed his surroundings. When he did, he finally realized the source of the feeling.

It was only 30 meters away.

This *something* that would have been enough to make him sweat uncomfortably from the other side of the planet was leaning on one of the trees lining the walking path and watching him.

However, this was not Gremlin.

But this person may have been even more bizarre than them in a certain way.

It was Ollerus.

It was the man who "should have become a Magic God" that Kamijou had met in Baggage City.

"Hey," said the man in a slight greeting as he removed his back from the tree and walked toward Kamijou. "Fiamma of the Right and I were discussing when you would notice me. It looks like I might owe him dinner. …But at least you weren't so dull you didn't notice me until the very end."

A Magic God.

That term did not refer to a god of demons.[1] It referred to someone who had mastered magic to the extent that they had taken one step into the domain of god.

[1] The Japanese term 魔神 can mean either "magic god" or "demon god".

That was the great monument of magicians that could only be achieved by obtaining the knowledge of all 103,000 grimoires contained in Index's head and being able to freely use it all. But another thought had entered Kamijou's mind when he had heard about it.

Is that something like Level 6?

Is that something that everyone whispers of being theoretically possible and there are rumors of it having existed at some time in history somewhere in the world, but no one has ever actually accomplished it?

And yet Ollerus had reached into that territory.

The fact that he himself only called himself the man who *should have become* a Magic God, made it seem unlikely he was simply exaggerating.

That monster of unimaginable power said, "You have obtained some stability now, right? It is about time we spoke. Spoke about something we could not in Baggage City."

"…"

"I'm sure you have tons of questions by this point. About the organization known as Gremlin. About the girl named Othinus that leads that organization. About their ultimate objective. About the term Magic God that she and I have in common. And most importantly…" Ollerus paused before continuing. When he did continue, he spoke very clearly. "About Imagine Breaker. About the secret of that power…or rather, its very identity."

His statement broke directly into the core of the issue.

His statement seemed to smash through something that had just barely been keeping everything dammed up and now it would all come flowing out at an unstoppable pace.

Kamijou heard an audible gulp and it took him a few seconds to realize it had come from his own throat.

Why had this come at a time like this?

He was helping his class prepare for the Ichihanaransai and had only just begun to feel like he was back to his normal life.

Kamijou agonized over it for a bit, but finally let out a sigh.

He dashed at full speed past Ollerus who seemed intent on beginning a long, drawn-out, and annoying conversation.

Ollerus, the man who should have become a Magic God, was left dumbfounded.

“W-wait!! I thought this was a serious scene! Wouldn’t you normally jump at the chance to learn about Imagine Breaker’s identity? Why aren’t you? Are kids these days really this dry? Waaaiiitt!!”

“Shut up!! I’m afraid of what’ll happen if I don’t get this food! They already think I skipped out on the preparations up until now, so I can’t just disappear after heading out to buy them lunch!! I’d end up with more than just a few bruises then!!”

He knew a conversation with that sort of “specialist” would end up dragging on forever.

He was not yet mentally prepared for that.

Kamijou begged for 2 or 3 love comedy scenes and maybe a fanservice scene before he had to deal with that.

Those with a full schedule had to flee lest they got wrapped up in all that.

Part 5

“And that is why I called you out behind the gym,” said Ollerus nonchalantly to Kamijou who had let his guard down after safely buying lunch.

Kamijou Touma was already passionately clenching his right fist.

“What do you want? To confess your love? To have a fight you don’t want anyone to see? Please, please tell me it’s the latter.”

“The Japanese school life certainly seems to go between two extremes. To be honest, I am having trouble understanding it.” Ollerus shrugged. “As I said before, I want to talk.”

“About what? And where do we start?”

“Now that is the real problem. Where to begin?”

He seemed to be troubled, but Kamijou was not sure if he truly was troubled. Did someone who very nearly became a Magic God really need to worry about anything at all?

As if to confirm Kamijou’s suspicions, Ollerus readily continued.

“Well, trying to arrange everything in some fancy way just to make myself look good isn’t going to help. I’ll start with the core of the issue and then we can work our way out from there if you have any questions. That should be fastest.”

“The core of the issue?”

“The Magic God Othinus.” Ollerus gave her that title despite referring to himself as only the man who “should have become” one. “Unlike me, you can say that she is a true Magic God. There is more or less nothing in this world that she cannot do. The organization of Gremlin is controlled by her power, so if we know what she wants, we should be able to tell what Gremlin’s overall actions will be. Also…” Ollerus paused and looked at Kamijou Touma’s right arm. “Fiamma of the Right once brought about a world war to acquire that right hand, but Gremlin and the Magic God Othinus are not after Imagine Breaker. Please take that to heart. …*You are not necessary to their plan, so they have no need to worry about your survival.* If you get in their way, they will kill you without hesitation. Keep in mind that you are up against a group like that.”

“…”

It was easy to forget, but Kamijou Touma was just a high school student.

He may have had some special experiences, but he was not a soldier or martial artist who had undergone proper training. Nor could he acquire professional tools or equipment. If he opposed an organization with worldwide operations, he would certainly be at a severe disadvantage. The very fact that he even thought about opposing them was a “miscalculation” of an amateur who could not properly compare his own power to that of Gremlin.

And on top of that, he had already gotten involved.

He had fought members of Gremlin and won, so he was past the point of no return. Even if Kamijou tried to retreat now, Gremlin would still want to finish things.

And after getting involved, Kamijou had no intention of retreating before he had finished things.

If he gave up, it would likely be more than just himself who suffered.

“Gremlin is a magic cabal that appeared due to World War III that Fiamma of the Right caused,” said Ollerus.

This was most likely information that even the experts on this topic at the Anglican Church did not know.

“Simply put, their ideology is something like ‘don’t just decide on your own that Academy City and the science side were the winners of the war’. The most prominent magician at the time was obviously Fiamma of the Right. …But *there is more to magicians than just him*. They do not like that he *named himself the representative of magic and then lost* despite the fact that they had not yet shown themselves.”

That may have been why they were based in Norse Mythology rather than Christianity.

They did not like that the loss of the Christian alliance between Rome and Russia had been forced onto their culture as well.

“But then aren’t they just being selfish? They didn’t want to have anything to do with World War III and refused to help, but now they’re complaining that the magic side lost?”

“Well, they would not have gained anything by helping Fiamma. And those higher up than Fiamma had more or less realized that even if he had succeeded, that method of his would not have saved the world as he thought it would.”

They could not accept having someone else’s loss forced onto themselves.

And so they were taking things into their own hands this time.

If Gremlin had gathered power based on that…

“Unlike a magic cabal with hundreds or even thousands of years of history, Gremlin does not have a regulated ideology. Gremlin is a concentration of the individual dissatisfaction and discontent of the magicians who sensed things heading to a loss during World War III. Naturally, those magicians are preparing a symbol to represent the magic side that can stand up to the winner of the war, Academy City.”

“…And that is the Magic God named Othinus?”

“It is a simple case of balancing the scales of power. I do not know if Othinus gathered the magicians around her or if the magicians searched out Othinus, though. Either way, Gremlin is trying to thoroughly strengthen Othinus so she can match the giant weight that is Academy City. …To keep things simple, you can think of Gremlin as an organization to grant the selfish wishes of Othinus.”

“But a Magic God can do anything, right? Does she really need to rely on others?”

“Being able to do anything is the problem in and of itself.” Ollerus gave a cynical smile as if commiserating with a colleague. “You often hear talk of ‘infinite possibilities’, but that truly means you have as many negative possibilities as you do positive possibilities.”

“?”

“This may be a bit hard to understand for someone at the age where you still believe in infinite possibilities. Just think of flipping a coin. The odds of getting heads or tails are 50/50. That is the true identity of ‘infinite possibilities’. Whenever you take an action, you carry both the possibility for success and the possibility for failure. No matter how hard you train, you still have 50% odds of losing in a fight to a child. That is what a Magic God is.”

50% was quite large.

In terms of Russian roulette, that would be starting the game with 3 live bullets.

“Gremlin and Othinus want to do something major to Academy City, the victors of this age. And so they want to do something about those ridiculous odds. They want her to be able to perfectly wield the power she has. They want her to have 100% odds of victory. A few modifications are needed for that. The preparations for this showed themselves on the surface as the disturbances in the Hawaiian Islands and Baggage City.”

“…Those were nothing more than preparations?”

“Othinus is another way of saying Odin, the head god of Norse mythology. They are likely following that mythology. *They are modifying the nature of that god by preparing a spiritual item that symbolizes that god’s nature.* …Norse mythology is a mythology of weapons. The power of the gods is represented by the power of weapons. Keeping that in mind, it is not too hard to predict what Othinus is after.” Ollerus spoke casually even though he was speaking of information that was directly linked to the fate of the world. “The holy spear of Gungnir. A spiritual item that represents Odin’s power as the head god. Most likely, they have been heading around the world in order to put that spiritual item together into its ultimate form.”

A furnace using the energy of the volcanic eruption in the Hawaiian Islands.

A Dvergr that possessed the skills needed to create the legendary weapons of Norse mythology.

The theft of the design from the head of Brunhild Eiktobel, a Valkyrie who had once succeeded in forging Gungnir even if only in part.

“Even with all that, it should have been impossible to create Gungnir in its ultimate form using the current techniques that exist on this earth, but the incident in Baggage City changed that.”

“?”

“The development of holistic espers. *A technique that does not exist on this earth.* If they do succeed in that, they will be able to reach possibilities that would previously have been unreachable. It would provide them with the final piece to finishing Gungnir.”

And once that spear was complete, Gremlin and its leader Othinus would take some kind of clear action against the entire world.

All the large-scale disturbances up to that point had been nothing more than what could be called warm-up exercises.

That power that had previously been constantly bound by 50% odds could then be freely wielded without fear.

That would indeed be a huge problem.

Kamijou did not properly understand just how frightening a thing like a Magic God was. Othinus had crushed his right hand, but that was not enough to see the true depths of that Magic God. However, Kamijou did know one thing clearly. He simply had to think of it as the types of Gremlin members he had seen at Hawaii and Baggage City spreading out to the entire world. That was likely a hopeless turn of events that no one but Gremlin wanted.

But…

At the same time…

"…"

Kamijou Touma looked down at his right hand.

Othinus was trying to modify her own possibilities to do away with the constant 50% odds, but was it possible she could do so without the Gungnir spiritual item?

For example…

By using Imagine Breaker.

That right hand could negate all forms of magic, so in terms of possibility, it could be said to be fixed at 0%. It would be heading in the opposite direction of Othinus who wanted greater power with 100% possibility, but surely there was a way of making use of the exact opposite.

For example, what if the path one chose was always wrong?

Then couldn't you always head down the correct path by always choosing the opposite of that path?

If you knew you would always fail, there were plenty of ways to use that. The Magic God Othinus was bound by the completely balanced odds of 50%. Those results could not be consistently used in the same way. That was why she remained stagnant.

If the helm could be turned sharply in the direction of either success or failure, she could actually do something with it.

And so…

Wouldn't that right hand be of value to Gremlin?

"You do not have to worry about that," replied Ollerus when Kamijou asked that question. "Imagine Breaker is incompatible with Othinus's ideas. Even if she knew it could be of use, I doubt she would ever even consider using it."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't like to answer a question with a question," said Ollerus without changing his expression. "But it is about time we got down to a fundamental issue. Do you know the identity of the Imagine Breaker you wield?"

Part 6

Once November came along, the cold kept much business from open-air cafés.

Academy City was filled with the hustle and bustle of preparations for some kind of festival, but something clearly "foreign" sat amid it all. A few people sat at a table in an otherwise empty open-air café. They gave off the atmosphere characteristic of those who did not understand the detailed rules of the situation, but they did not seem to care.

The first was Marian Slingeneyer.

She was a brown-skinned girl with long, braided silver hair and red-framed glasses. She wore a highly revealing outfit made up of nothing but overalls worn over her bare skin. That outfit seemed unsuited for November, but she had made her way through the Eastern European Baggage City dressed like that. She still showed no sign of shivering from the cold.

The second was Mjölnir.

This girl (?) had lost all semblance of a human form and now looked like a black drum can over a meter tall. She was clearly someone who could not blend into a normal cityscape, but for better or for worse, Academy City was filled with drum-shaped cleaning robots and security robots. She did not draw too much attention because people seemed to assume she was some type of robot.

And there was a third person.

This final person was a thin, white-skinned boy. His thin frame and his waist-length blond hair gave him a somehow feminine look. His clothes were primarily yellow and black. He wore a tight-fitting shirt and pants as well as a stole around his shoulders. He looked the most normal of the three, but the exact opposite was true.

He was Thor.

He was referred to as the god of thunder, he was especially skilled in direct combat even for a member of Gremlin, and he was their representative combat member.

He had the destructive power needed to wage a war all on his own.

And yet…

“Unyah… Nope. I just can’t work up any motivation…” said Marian Slingeneyer as she laid her upper body limply on the table.

The drum-shaped Mjölnir clattered as it shook next to her as if to express worry and concern.

They were official members of Gremlin, the organization that was spreading chaos throughout the world, but Thor was a bit disappointed in what he had found once entering within that framework. Despite the large scale of their actions, they did not pay much heed to the hierarchy of the organization. The only real problem was getting into the framework in the first place.

(Well, Marian’s bad mood is probably due to Kihara Kagun’s death.)

That was Thor’s offhand guess. The Magic God Othinus was still using Kihara Kagun as a puppet, but a puppet was no more than a puppet. Only the vestiges of what he was in life remained and not much of his living self would remain for long.

But he could guess that Marian Slingeneyer’s desperation would have known no bounds had that lingering “scent” of Kihara Kagun not remained even as fleeting as that was.

To be honest, Thor did not like having someone as unstable as Marian around him in a situation like that. He had no idea when his surroundings would be transformed into something truly psychedelic.

Thor’s specialty was war.

Sending in a specialist in direct combat like him could develop into a full blown war.

But even so, he was not a pervert that got turned on by bloodshed. He did not like splatter horror movies and he would much prefer not to go into a haunted house.

And so he wished to give a warning before they began.

“Remember, no preemptive strikes this time.”

“Yeah, yeah…”

“And that includes making alterations to people to ‘stock up’ for the battle. Do you really understand that?”

“…Yeah, yeah…”

They were right in the middle of enemy territory and all he got were horrible half-hearted replies.

The black, drum-shaped girl (?) started shaking and clattering once more.

Part 7

The identity of Imagine Breaker.

That was what Ollerus had said. And that of course implied that he knew what it was.

And more importantly…

Did that mean what resided in Kamijou Touma’s right hand did not belong to the science side?

“Surely you have figured out that the power that resides in your hand was not created by Academy City’s esper development techniques,” said Ollerus simply. “Of course, there are unique natural espers that exist outside of Academy City known as Gemstones. …However, there is no real evidence that you are one of them. You have some sort of supernatural power that came about outside of Academy City. When you put it that way, don’t you think that puts your position in a bit of a gray area?”

“…”

“The group you used to interpret your existence just so happened to be Academy City of the science side. That is why you grew to believe that your power could be explained using a scientific interpretation. Now, what if you had been picked up by the Anglican Church of the magic side when you were a small child? You would likely then have explained your own existence to yourself from a magic worldview and grown to believe that you were a member of the magic side.”

“So…*what exactly is it …*?”

Kamijou clenched and opened his right hand.

He then rephrased his question.

"*What exactly am I?*"

"That is something that you must decide on your own, but I will give you the interpretation I have come to *from my own perspective*."

Not just science and not just magic.

Someone who stands opposite of the Magic God Othinus who controls Gremlin.

An interpretation from Ollerus, the man who should have become a Magic God.

"You, or rather, the power that resides in your right hand can be said to be a collection of the hope and the fear of all magicians."

"What?"

"One who truly masters magic becomes a Magic God. But fear does not disappear for even a Magic God who can do anything. And that is not simply due to the 50% restriction I mentioned before. It is a fear that anyone with a proper mind will feel if they possess great enough power."

Ollerus had to have experienced that more than anyone else, but his expression did not change.

It was possible the feelings of someone who had advanced as far as him were beyond what a normal human could imagine.

"There was once a man known as Terra of the Left. He was a special magician that belonged to God's Right Seat just as Fiamma of the Right did. Systematically, he was probably the person who came the closest to knowing the identity of Imagine Breaker. …Perhaps even more so than Fiamma of the Right. After all, he researched the contradiction in power relations needed for the Son of God to be killed by human hands and managed to put together the spell Execution of Light all on his own."

"?"

"Imagine Breaker can also have the effect of becoming a turning point of legends and of the very age itself."

Kamijou was unsure what connection that had to do with what a Magic God feared.

Ollerus continued speaking.

“A Magic God can distort the world as she desires. She can distort it as she wishes, but it cannot always be brought back to how it was before. Any childishly selfish wish such as making all the water running from the water pipes turn into orange juice is perfectly doable. But the more the world is distorted, the greater the danger of some kind of harmful side effects presenting themselves. And even if she tries to turn the world back to how it was, there is a danger of her *no longer being able to tell exactly how the original world was* after distorting it. These changes we are talking about are like changing the length of a meter or changing the weight of a gram.”

“So if that’s the fear, what is the hope?”

“A world like that would be a frightening thing, wouldn’t it? Even if you can alter everything to your selfish whims, you would want some kind of insurance, wouldn’t you? The simplest way to put it would be a backup or a reference point you could use to return the world to normal. I suppose you could say your right hand is like the International Prototype Kilogram. Even if the world is utterly distorted and you can no longer recall how long a meter used to be or how heavy a gram used to be, your right hand can negate all magic, so a reference point still exists. By measuring the length, weight, and temperature of your right hand, someone who has distorted the world too greatly can recall what the original world was like. It acts as a lifeline that allows the world to be reverted to normal, no matter how far it has been distorted in any direction.”

That was the hope.

If there was some insurance, you could go nuts and not worry about holding back.

No restraint was needed, so you could simply act on all of your desires.

It was an extremely selfish hope that existed only from the point of view of the one making the changes.

“There was a time when powers similar to that showed themselves here and there throughout an era. Some took the form of weapons and made their way into the hands of great heroes, some took the form of frescos and were rumored to heal the diseases of any who touched them, and others took the form of caves and functioned as trials for those who entered them. …I do not know if the power in your hand is simply one more of those powers or if those hopes combined together into another form as they were lost and have naturally appeared here. I can make some guesses, but I have not tested any of them. However, I can say one thing for sure. Your right hand functions as a reference point for the world.”

At that point Ollerus paused.

But then he continued once more.

"Othinus wants to take this world where Academy City and the science side have won and distort it beyond recognition. For this reason, she not only sees no value in a backup, but it is actually the greatest hindrance to her plan. If something remains that can restore the previous age after it has been changed, a backup changes from being a hope to being a fear. That is why Othinus does not seek Imagine Breaker. …Gremlin wishes to cut that lifeline and do nothing but advance. The idea of insurance is nothing but an evil temptation to them. And Imagine Breaker's ability to negate everything is the greatest example of such insurance."

Part 8

Evening came. Normally, it would have been past time to be back from school, but that restriction was gone thanks to the preparations for the Ichihanaransai. Kamijou Touma had been temporarily freed from the school so that he could take a short break to refresh.

"…What do I do?"

Index would still be in his dorm, but it did not seem he would be able to return anytime soon. Not only did he have the Ichihanaransai preparations to deal with, but he did not feel he could afford getting sidetracked until he had figured out what Ollerus's objective was and ensured everyone's safety.

Academy City was strictly guarded.

Magicians had snuck in a few times before, but it could not have been easy. It took a fair amount of cost and risk to enter the city. So what did Ollerus gain from doing so? Surely he was not there simply to answer Kamijou's questions.

A chill that stabbed into Kamijou's skin had already crept up on him.

It may have had something to do with distancing himself from the hustle and bustle of his class, but Kamijou felt some sort of emptiness in his chest. It made it all come back to him. Ollerus who should have become a Magic God and Othinus who had gone beyond that and become a Magic God. And Gremlin. How long would those casual and peaceful days last? Would Kamijou head out to face Gremlin or would Gremlin come to Academy City? Either way, the atmosphere surrounding the city would not last forever. And then another thought suddenly hit him.

The disturbance in Hawaii.

The hell in Baggage City.

Those were not simply events happening in some other part of the world. They were directly related to Academy City. If Gremlin's objective really was to show their objection to Academy City being the victors of the era, it was entirely possible the city would become the center of the disturbances.

How much could Kamijou do to protect everyone from such a great mass of violence?

Kamijou was unable to give a clear answer to that question. But it was obvious that, even if he was only a Japanese high school student, he could not just ignore the question. Gremlin and Othinus viewed his right hand and Imagine Breaker that resided within it to be a threat.

He could not avoid a fierce battle.

The only question was when, where, and how it would begin.

"…"

Kamijou shuddered as he imagined the cityscape wrapped in the festive mood of Ichihanaransai preparations transforming into the type of thing he had seen in Baggage City.

Obvious defeat.

A situation where he had arrived too late.

And even if he had made it in time and arrived before it was all over, he had difficulty imagining what he could have done when faced with that horrifying mayhem.

He could not let the same thing happen to Academy City.

Kamijou Touma was strongly and deeply convinced of that.

And then…

"Misaka…?" muttered Kamijou when he spotted a familiar face in the crowd.

It was a girl with short, brown hair who was wearing the uniform of the prestigious Tokiwadai Middle School. She wore an expensive-looking coat over the rest of the uniform. Kamijou guessed she was out buying something to help prepare for the Ichihanaransai.

She was Academy City's #3.

She was the girl known as the Railgun who had the most powerful of the electrical generation-type powers.

Suddenly, their eyes met.

When Mikoto noticed Kamijou, she started in his direction.

Kamijou raised one hand and said, “Misaka, are you preparing for the Ichihanaran-…”

He was not able to finish his sentence.

Misaka Mikoto suddenly slammed her fist down on top of Kamijou’s head without holding back in the slightest.

It was a completely serious blow.

For an instant, Kamijou’s vision completely blacked out and he crouched over with tears in his eyes.

In response, Mikoto gave a derisive snort and said, “How can you approach me with such a friendly demeanor after ditching me in Hawaii?”

“A-aghh…”

“I have noooooooooooo idea how you think you’ve made up for that debt, but I am very displeased with you. I’m about ready to beat you to a pulp and dump you in a trashcan.”

“…I-I’m sorry.”

“That doesn’t cut it!! That doesn’t cut it at all!!”

“No, Kamijou-san really does think he was completely wrong this time, okay?”

“You say that, but deep down you’re still glad you kept me from seeing what happened after that, aren’t you? You’re using a heroic interpretation for it all, aren’t you?”

“…”

“At least try to deny it!! Do you never learn!? And you know what? I’m actually stronger than you when it comes to pure power! Rely on me!! I’m telling you I’m willing to help, so let me!!”

As he watched Mikoto complain, Kamijou began to think.

If Gremlin did invade Academy City, would he look to Misaka Mikoto for help then?

He had managed to get by in Hawaii.

But he had received a serious blow he could do nothing about in Baggage City.

Was that a reason to get her help? Or was that a reason to keep her uninvolved?

He decided he should probably decide on a clear stance on that issue ahead of time.

"Hey, Misaka."

"What?"

"Do you remember what happened in Hawaii?"

"…You mean when you suddenly tossed me aside like a piece of trash? And overseas no less."

"I'm being serious here. Things got a little nuts there, but if some people who thought that was just the beginning were coming to Academy City, do you think it would be right to place your friends in a position where they are likely to bear the full brunt of the attack?"

"…Oh?"

"I'll be honest. I'm conflicted on this issue. I want to get as much help as I can, but at the same time I feel it would be better to deal with it all myself rather than get the people I know involved with those monsters."

"That's quite the unfair question," replied Mikoto. And then, "*But it is much, much too late to be worrying about that now*."

The tone of voice of the girl standing before him suddenly changed.

And a pale light began to shine from the tips of the fingers on Mikoto's right hand. Much too late, Kamijou realized something odd about what had happened before.

Specifically, that fist to the head.

Misaka Mikoto was the type of person who reflexively shot high voltage electricity from her bangs, so why had she used a physical attack rather than her power?

"You…!!"

"You still haven't caught up? You really *are* slow."

Kamijou heard a great roar. It was the sound of air being pushed out of the way like when someone swung a bat with all their might. But that was not the true identity of the threat. It was a frighteningly bright flash of light coming from Mikoto's (?) right hand.

(An electric arc? Is it a burner used for welding or fusing!?)

Kamijou's vision greatly blurred.

He dropped his hips down to lower his upper body, and some kind of fusing blade passed by horizontally above his head. The wind turbine behind him was mercilessly sliced through with what looked like a camera flash.

"Oh, nice. When did you learn to do more than simply defend? If you had done nothing more than hold out your right hand, we would have been in a stalemate with you stuck standing in one place."

There had been more than one slice.

The long pillar had been sliced into multiple pieces like a radish sliced by someone who did not know how to cook. This was because an arc fusion blade several meters long was extending from each of the five fingers on Mikoto's right hand.

This was something she could likely accomplish with her power.

However, Kamijou had a feeling she would rely on her iron sand sword for close quarters combat. It was less of an issue of if she *could* do it and more of an issue of if she *would* do it with her principles and preferences.

"Damn you...!!"

As Kamijou raged, this person with Misaka Mikoto's face tried to stab their left hand towards his head. Five arc fusion blades were extending from that hand as well. The emission of the blades and the thrust of the arm were carried out in one smooth action like the arm itself was a pile bunker.

Kamijou moved his head to the side to avoid the blades and swung his right fist at Misaka Mikoto's left wrist.

His fist struck her wrist from below, causing her left arm to shoot straight up. Kamijou took a step forward into the empty space this left, grabbed Mikoto's neck with his right hand, and slammed her back into a nearby bench.

While holding her in place, Kamijou shouted, "*You aren't Mikoto, are you!? Who are you!?*"

He heard a cracking noise.

The skin of whoever was taking on Misaka Mikoto's form began to split open around the neck where he was grabbing them. As Kamijou watched on in shock, the cracks spread farther and farther. And it did not only spread across her entire body. The cracks spread across the entirety of Misaka Mikoto's form, including the coat and hair decorations she was wearing.

"I'm sure you have a pretty good idea," said the person as the lips moved despite a portion of them being missing thanks to the countless cracks.

In the next moment, the destruction exceeded a sustainable level.

The image of Misaka Mikoto shattered and a boy with long, blond hair, white skin, and a feminine look appeared from within.

He smiled thinly and continued speaking despite still being held by the throat.

"I suppose I should introduce myself as the Lightning God Thor. I am in charge of direct combat for Gremlin. …As you can see, *we* are already here in the city."

Between the Lines 1

The kind priest said…

"Bring out a stone to burn this girl. If she is innocent, our lord shall protect her so that she shall not burn. If he does not and she suffers burns, it shall mean she is a witch."

The kind priest said…

"Dunk this girl underwater. If she is innocent, our Lord shall protect her so that she shall not suffer from lack of breath even underwater. If he does not and she does wish for air while beneath the water, it shall mean she is a witch."

The kind priest said…

"Throw this girl into a large birdcage and hang her from the tower. If she is innocent, our Lord shall protect her so that she shall not hunger even after hanging for a month. If he does not and she is tormented by hunger, it shall mean she is a witch."

The kind priest said…

The kind priest said…

The kind priest said…

The kind priest said. The kind priest said. The kind priest said. The kind priest said. The kind priest said. The kind priest said. The kind priest said. The kind priest said. The kind priest said. The kind priest said. The kind priest said. The kind priest said. The kind priest said. The kind priest said. The kind priest said.

“A-ahh… Aaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

When the kind priest saw me, he fell into a sitting position with his eyes opened wide. What could be the problem? Did I look strange in some way? I was fairly certain I was not doing anything inappropriate.

“Wh-what? How? How!?”

The sound of vague chatter rose from the stone-paved square in the center of the small town. How very strange. What did they all find to be so odd?

As I stood there looking confused, the kind priest pointed at me and began shouting.

However, he did not seem able to get an entire sentence out.

“Y-you…you… Fräulein Kreutune….you!?”

“Sigh. Is there something the matter with me?”

“You…you!! How…how are you still alive after everything we did to you!? Why is your skin still shining so brightly!? How…how…how…how!?”

What a strange thing to say.

Still looking confused, a smile slipped out on my face.

“But, kind priest. Have you forgotten what you yourself said?”

“Huh? …Eh?”

“*If I am innocent, our Lord shall protect me.*”

“…!!”

The kind priest grasped the cross hanging from his neck so tightly it must have hurt. Red liquid dripped down and the small piece of metal began to bend under the great pressure.

“How dare you…How dare a monster like you speak of our Lord!! We threw you into the lake with your arms and legs bound, we bound you atop of the tower where lightning struck you, and we burned your entire body with fire! And yet you are still able to smile like that! You are clearly a *witch*!!”

“Oh, kind, kind priest.”

I spread my arms as if to welcome in a friend with the intent of accepting everything that entailed.

“Have you run out of trials to put me through? Let’s see, there is one thing I would like to check on: now that I have weathered these trials by ordeal without suffering any harm, what are you supposed to do with me?”

CHAPTER 2

Who is the Real Enemy?

Secret_Promise.

Part 1

Kamijou ate some dinner in a local burger shop with Thor, a combat member of Gremlin.

"…What is this?"

"It's the new salsa burger meal. Ugh, they tried too hard to make it unique and ended up making the flavor way too strong. And it's spicy!! I can see why the standard large burger never stops being the best seller."

"That's not what I meant, you idiot!! We! Are!! Enemies!! There's something wrong with us eating together like this!!"

"What? Is it that odd for us to have a bit of a chat? Whether I was a member of Gremlin or not, I'm betting you would be treating me differently if I was a short girl with large breasts that clearly wanted you to protect her."

"Are you making fun of me?"

"That's why I tried to make this easier by disguising myself as a girl you know."

"Come to think of it, how did that work?"

"You wouldn't understand me if I got into the details of the magic, so I'll try to keep it simple. In Norse mythology, when the thunder god had his weapon stolen, he disguised himself as the goddess of beauty, Freyja, in order to lure out the thief. I put together a disguise spell based on that legend, but that means I can only disguise myself as girls."

"…How did you know about what Misaka and I said back in Hawaii?"

"When that argument happened, the FCE surveillance network that used cameras throughout America was still running. In other words, it all went straight to Gremlin. I've gotta say, Misaka-chan is quite the young lady."

“Noooooooooooooo!! My yooooooooooooooouuuuuuuuuuuuttttttttttthhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

Thor gave a cheerful smile as Kamijou held his head and wailed.

“Don’t worry about it. With the life you live, you can’t afford to get embarrassed over every little thing like that.”

“How can you say that!? Are you trying to pick a fight after all!?”

“In a way, I suppose I am,” said Thor as he lightly shook his blond hair that reached his waist. “But the type of fights you saw in Hawaii and Baggage City *are not my type of fight*. That kind of thing is no fun. Of course, I suppose I am a villain if I use that as the basis for my decisions.”

“…”

“C’mon, eat. Don’t just sit there. I’m paying, so you might as well eat as much as you can, right?”

Thor must have not liked spicy foods because he seemed to give his tongue a rest with a bite of salad or sip of soda between each bite of the salsa burger. Since he did not seem to like that kind of food, he may have been won over by the temptation of ordering a new item on the menu.

Kamijou grabbed the wrapper for his hamburger while making sure not to get any red sauce on his fingers.

“…So what did you want to talk about? Are you here to make a declaration of war?”

“This would be a lot simpler if I could. Even without doing that, the situation here is tangled up in a complicated mess. Basically, I want to clean up that mess before getting to the real issue at hand.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Ollerus.”

Thor spoke a single name.

With that name spoken, Kamijou knew he could no longer remain wholly uninvolved.

“He told you some things *without giving you any proof* while looking down on you the entire time, didn’t he? And now you have grown rather nervous about what crisis is going to occur. Am I wrong?”

"…Without giving any proof? Are you saying he was lying?"

"You are afraid of being made to fight according to someone else's wishes again, aren't you? Like with Leivinia Birdway in Hawaii or Kihara Kagun in Baggage City."

"…"

"Don't glare at me like that. We know we are at the root of it all. But do you truly believe that just because we in Gremlin are the villains that Ollerus is wholly good and just simply by opposing us? Or to go even further, *can anyone who resolves his problems with violence truly be considered good and just*?"

He was no longer referring only to Ollerus. That last comment denied all the actions Kamijou had taken up to that point.

And even Kamijou was not so sure he was wrong.

For example, there was Tsukuyomi Komoe.

For example, there was Last Order.

For example, there was Oyafune Monaka.

A truly good person and a truly just person may have been someone who was able to choose to not fight even in a crisis and yet was still able to save their enemy with that choice.

That was a territory that lay far, far ahead of Kamijou who would clench his fist without thinking whenever a problem occurred.

"Now, let's talk about Ollerus. Let's talk about that man who relies on violence just as much as we do in Gremlin," said Thor as he put ketchup on a nugget. "He did not come to Academy City alone."

"What?"

"He brought the Saint named Silvia, Fiamma of the Right who was the true leader of God's Right Seat, a Valkyrie named Brunhild Eiktobel, and Leivinia Birdway, the boss of the magic cabal named the Dawn-Colored Sunlight. Every one of them is enough of a monster not to lose to your average member of Gremlin. *They go well beyond the level of a normal magician.* …Basically, they detected our movements and gathered in Academy City to stop our plan."

Leivinia Birdway.

Kamijou felt an ominous feeling in his chest when he heard that name.

The boss of the Dawn-Colored Sunlight. She had tricked Kamijou and the others when they went to Hawaii to resolve the situation there, creating a large crack between Academy City and its cooperative institutions. She had been one of the root causes behind the disturbance in Baggage City.

But this was no time to get caught up over that.

"What about it? Aren't they here to protect the people of Academy City from the likes of you?"

"If so *why did they choose to make Academy City the battlefield*?" pointed out Thor in annoyance. He threw a nugget in his mouth and continued, "If they truly wished to protect Academy City from us, it would have been in their best interests to put an end to this before we snuck into Academy City. Simply put, it would have been easy enough to set up a defensive line around Academy City rather than waiting within. The sea around Japan or the mountains around the Kanto district would have worked nicely." Thor licked ketchup and grease from his fingertips before continuing in a lower tone. "So why did they set up this great force within Academy City? They know how dangerous we in Gremlin are. Surely they have taken into consideration the possibility that we have already made our way in by this point. It seems to me that they are *intentionally setting things up so Academy City is involved*. But what do you think? Does this seem like the work of pacifists?"

"…"

"Just as we have our own objective in Gremlin, Ollerus's group has their own objective. And they will use Academy City to carry it out. That is the meaning behind how they are setting this up. Who knows if it will work or not, but they want a conflict to break out in Academy City so the city's defensive forces target us in Gremlin. I doubt those defenses can actually kill me, but having to fight the science side and Ollerus's group at the same time would make things quite a bit more difficult."

Every individual magician belonging to Gremlin had monstrous powers.

But that was not the most frightening thing.

That would be the fact that those powers were wielded as a group.

"So you're saying Ollerus's group chose this location so events would stray from the standard pattern and interfere with Gremlin's teamwork?"

"That's my theory anyway."

Kamijou put his half-eaten burger down on the tray.

He had suddenly lost his appetite.

They were allowing the fires of war to spread through Academy City to carry out their own objective.

If that was true, the friend/foe chart had suddenly changed.

"…Do you know what Ollerus is after?"

"No. In the end, it really comes down to the antagonism between Ollerus and Othinus. They're both monsters completely immersed in the territory of a Magic God. I have no idea if *a mere member like me* would be privy to the true intentions behind it all."

"You're telling me to trust you based on that!? That's exactly the kind of thing an enemy would say!!"

"I never said to trust me, you idiot. I'm telling you not to rely too much on information from just one side. I'm sure Ollerus told you all sorts of things. So now hear what our side has to say. Once you've gathered as much information as you can, you can come to your own conclusion. The only way to escape being someone's puppet is to think for yourself. And if you're going to do that, the more information you have, the better. Am I wrong?"

"…Then what are you after? No matter which path I choose, I'm still going to be your enemy."

"Even if we are enemies and we must fight eventually, I think we should have everything settled beforehand so we can fight with no reservations. To be honest, the situation surrounding you is pretty pathetic. Everyone is desperate to lead you around like a trained monkey so they can use your right hand's power for their own benefit. A fight with you under those circumstances wouldn't be any fun. *What is your view of the situation*?" Thor continued speaking as he battled the salsa burger even though it seemed clear he had already lost. "The thing is, Ollerus has shown off an odd characteristic at times. I don't know if he has always been like this or if he became like this as he approached becoming a Magic God, though."

"…?"

"He is fundamentally a philanthropist. If he sees someone in trouble, he will use any amount of power to help that person. But he loses sight of his surroundings when that happens. To be blunt, he is a man who would slaughter a military force of 1 million to save a single child he had never met before. I do not know what Ollerus is telling himself his actions are saving here, but if it is something outside of Academy City, it is entirely possible he would see no problem with using Academy City to save it."

It was unclear how much of what that boy was saying was true.

However, it was true that Kamijou knew nothing when it came to Ollerus. He had been saved by the man in Baggage City, but that was not enough to say that Ollerus was truly his ally.

It had been the same with Leivinia Birdway, the boss of the Dawn-Colored Sunlight.

Kamijou asked a serious question.

“Let’s say for argument’s sake that Gremlin is up to no good and Ollerus’s group is not being exactly benevolent despite opposing them. What do you gain by explaining all of this to me?”

“Oh, that’s simple,” said Thor offhandedly. “Gremlin has come to Academy City because there is something here we want. And Ollerus has come to Academy City to stop us. …I happen to know of a way we can completely dumbfound both of those groups as they take their annoyingly careful and hesitant actions. Don’t you think that would be fun?”

“?”

“The two of us can rescue the prize they are fighting over.”

Part 2

The surgery in Fremea Seivelun’s mouth was over.

“O-ohh… Ohhhh…”

The effects of the anesthetic must have still remained to a certain extent because she let out a moan over how odd her mouth felt. She was leaving the dentist’s office with Hamazura and Takitsubo who had accompanied her to prevent her from running off.

“In the first place, I want to eat something!” she said to them.

“After all that crying and screaming, you still haven’t learned your lesson!?”

The footpath they walked along was enveloped in the restless mood of the Ichihanaransai preparations. As the Ichihanaransai was a giant collection of cultural festivals, the shops were set up on the school grounds, but cheap stands targeting students were set up along the streets and paths during the preparatory period. This helped add to the festive mood during the preparations.

Takitsubo Rikou's gaze blankly wandered around the surroundings.

"...Hamazura, what are we going to do now?"

"We've done everything we need to do, so we head home. First we need to take Fremea back to her dorm."

Hamazura and Takitsubo currently lived together. However, Mugino Shizuri and Kinuhata Saiai were there as well, bringing all of Item together. Simply referring to them as roommates was simple enough, but it put some severe restrictions on Hamazura. He cared enough about appearances that he could not bring himself to flirt with Takitsubo in front of the other girls. In the end, he was forced to calculate things out based on everyone's mysterious schedules to get any time alone with Takitsubo Rikou. (And whenever he did, Takitsubo seemed to get so caught up in popping bubble wrap that she did not pay any attention to him.)

"Hamazura, we need to buy some detergent before going home."

"I see."

"So get some money out at the bank."

"I see."

"Convenience store ATMs have a handling fee, so we need to get to the bank ATM before they close."

"...There's just no sex appeal to that attitude, y'know?"

"Hamazura."

The girl wearing a pink track suit tugged at Hamazura's clothes.

He frowned.

"?"

"Fremea is gone."

Hamazura frantically looked around, but Fremea Seivelun was nowhere to be found.

However, he could hear a familiar soprano voice coming from amid the crowd.

“Nyahh nyahh!! In the first place, this says they have bite-size fruit marshmallows with 30 different types of fruit filling! I’m gonna keep eating them until I’ve found every kind!!”

“That damn brat!! Why isn’t she afraid of having to get more fillings!?” shouted Hamazura as he ran off to go protect the peace inside that girl’s mouth.

He couldn’t let her get so excited over those black creatures armed with road construction equipment.

Part 3

After finishing most of his burger meal, Thor ordered some hot coffee and cheesecake for some reason.

“By the way, what do you think of fast food coffee? Is it good enough for you?”

“If you don’t like it, don’t order it… Personally, I don’t even have any real problems with canned coffee,” replied Kamijou with a disheartened expression.

Thor happily sipped at the cheap coffee and said, “So how far did we get?”

“You said Gremlin led by the Magic God Othinus and the group of monsters led by the almost-Magic-God Ollerus are after some prize, and we can get to it ahead of them.” Kamijou wiped the grease off his fingers with a paper napkin. “So what exactly is this prize?”

“What Othinus wants is a person,” replied Thor. “A person who has not been dyed in the colors of magic or science and therefore *could go either way*. But doing that would put a major burden on the person’s body, so this person also has to have exceedingly high durability allowing them to undergo modifications that would kill any normal person from the shock.”

“…What do you mean?”

“Who knows. To be honest, not even we know the specifics. This specific person’s name can be glimpsed in records of the witch hunts from the middle ages. It comes up in accounts of a very strange incident where the holy men who were known for killing anyone they found suspicious, that they were jealous of, or that they simply did not like *gave up on killing someone because this person was simply too durable for the holy men to deal with*.”

“…”

Kamijou could not imagine how what Thor had just mentioned could be connected to the current situation.

Whatever those records were, they had to have been from hundreds of years ago.

He simply did not see how they could be related to Academy City, the headquarters of Japanese science.

When he asked about it, Thor readily replied.

"It still isn't over."

"…What?"

"This woman would continue smiling even when they tried to burn her alive or crush her with weights, and it seems not even the flow of time could do her in. So you see, this is related. Even if her name is seen in records from hundreds of years in the past, she has yet to die. Presumably, she is still smiling somewhere on this earth."

"She's…still alive…?"

"Exactly. Of course, I doubt she's just some especially durable human. Whatever she really is, *her core or true nature must lie elsewhere*. This durability is likely nothing more than one facet of her special characteristics."

Thor tried to slice the cheesecake with a plastic fork but accidentally squashed it flat.

"And just so you know, the odds are good she is here in Academy City."

"Why? If she was in records of the witch hunts, wouldn't she have a closer connection to the magic side?"

"She only happened to get caught up in the witch hunts that were sweeping society at the time. It is actually unclear which side she truly lies on. It's possible she does not belong to either."

Thor stabbed his fork into the flattened cheesecake, but it fell back to the plate when he tried to lift it to his mouth. He then grabbed it directly with his fingers and brought it to his mouth.

"But we *do not* think Academy City took her in in order to carry out some kind of scientific experiment. …If that were the case, some simple results of that research would have shown themselves on the surface."

"Then what?"

"A last-ditch effort." Thor gave a thin smile as he licked his fingertips. "*Whatever she may be*, she has proven in those cruel witch trials that she cannot be killed by any means. She is an existence that goes against the wishes of Academy City's leader, but she cannot be dealt with in a simple assassination. Having her wandering around the world smiling destroys the hopes of the city's leader, and yet she cannot be killed or otherwise disposed of. What do you think the city's leader would do to deal with this problem?"

"He can't kill her to silence her, but he can't have her wandering around freely? Also, you say she is in Academy City but I've never heard of someone like that." Kamijou thought for a bit. "You don't mean…She's being imprisoned somewhere?"

"Exactly." As he had just finished eating the sweet cake, Thor's expression grew grim as he took another sip of his coffee. "If you can't kill someone, the fastest way to isolate them from the world is to rob them of their mobility. Most likely, she is being imprisoned in the most solid building in Academy City. …And that is why the situation has grown even more complicated."

The most solid building in Academy City.

Kamijou frowned as he thought for a bit.

Could it be a shelter in the vast underground area of District 22? Or could it be somewhere in the highly secretive District 2 or District 23?

But Thor shook his head.

He said, "There is an incredibly obvious answer."

"?"

"*The windowless building*."

With no hesitation, the Lightning God Thor spoke the name of Academy City's "heart".

"That is this city's greatest fortress. Aleister, the chairman of the city's board of directors, uses it as his castle. That woman…Fräulein Kreutune is imprisoned there."

Part 4

There was once a project known as the Dark May Project.

It had been carried out by a research institution affiliated with some of the darkest parts of Academy City. The thought patterns of Accelerator, Academy City's most powerful

Level 5, had been analyzed and a portion of them had been implanted in other espers to raise their level of power.

There had been few successes.

Even fewer had managed to survive to the present day.

And yet…

"Y'know…"

"You super annoy me, so please do not speak to me."

Two girls walked through Academy City in the evening during the preparations for the Ichihanaransai. They were both survivors of that nightmarish project, and they were both Level 4s that manipulated the nitrogen in the air.

One was Kinuhata Saiai.

She was a girl of about 12 who wore a fluffy knit dress. Her hair was brown and in a bob. Her power was known as Offense Armor and was specialized for defense. She covered her body in armor made of nitrogen concentrated a few centimeters thick which allowed her to automatically defend against any attacks coming her way. She could easily handle a direct hit from a sniper rifle.

The other was Kuroyoru Umidori.

She was a girl of about 12 who wore a punk-style tank top and pants of black leather as well as a white coat hanging from its hood on her head. She had long black hair, but the strands hanging down by her ears were dyed yellow. Her power was known as Bomber Lance and was specialized for offense. She could produce nitrogen spears several meters long from the palms of her hands. However, she was a cyborg as well as an esper, so she could add as many mechanical arms as she liked to increase the number of spears she could produce.

They were both members of Academy City's dark side.

Those girls had a villainous side to them that prevented them from purely being considered victims.

And this was why they saw no reason to try to get along simply because they had both been involved in the same project.

In fact, the atmosphere between them was so strained it seemed they would take a fallen glass as a sign to begin grabbing for each other's throat.

Kuroyoru twisted her lips in a sneer.

“I may not be the best person to bring this up, but what are you doing? I just can’t get a grasp on your position here. If you just want to protect Fremea Seivelun, wouldn’t it be easier to just kill me and bury me somewhere?”

“I will make sure to super kill you if I get the chance. Unlike Hamazura, I have no intention of super getting along with you, so don’t worry.”

“Speaking of Hamazura, what is with him? You’re taking me somewhere on his orders, right? Why don’t you just ignore him? We both had that monster’s thought patterns implanted in us, so I don’t see why you wouldn’t hesitate to refuse any orders someone gives you.”

“That only applies to you since you had that monster’s offensive side super implanted into you. I was specialized on the defensive side, so I have super no idea what you’re talking about. And it isn’t like Hamazura ordered me to do this. But I guess it would be super hard for you to imagine since you’ve never known anything outside of vertical relationships.”

“Where are we headed anyway?” asked Kuroyoru suspiciously.

That caused Kinuhata Saiai to smile.

However, this expression had none of the kindness or sympathy one generally associated with a smile. Perhaps the best description of it is a “dark joy”.

And so she gave her response.

“It is super the same place as Fremea Seivelun was sent to.”

“What?”

“Tah dah!! The most frightening super dentist in District 7, aka the Hero’s Cave!!”

A slight commotion was then heard.

It was the sound of Kuroyoru trying to take a few steps back and Kinuhata grabbing her collar to stop her.

Kinuhata Saiai poured everything she had into her smile.

“There is super no use in trying to hide it. Hamazura is super sensitive to even the slightest change in his comrades. We know that you have been super avoiding chewing with your back teeth.”

“Comrades!? What do you mean comrades!?”

“Oh, don’t worry. That super bothers me as much as it does you. Anyway, I have super intentionally brought you to the dentist that is known as the most skilled and is the most feared by the neighborhood children.”

“…!!”

“Oh? Is Kuroyoru Umidori-chan, the great representative of the Freshmen, super afraid of the dentist? Are you the kind of crybaby that actually raises her hand when the dentist super tells you to raise your hand if it hurts?”

“I-I…!! I am a cyborg!! If there is any defect in my body parts, I swap them out for manmade parts!! So there is no need to inefficiently carve away at my teeth!! I just have to get completely new ones, so this is completely pointless!!”

“Yes, yes. Now super get in there. I super have your insurance card, so don’t worry about that.”

“…Give it a fucking rest. If you keep looking down on me, I won’t just rip out a tooth. I’ll tear your entire body to pieces!”

Kuroyoru Umidori let out a small breath and tried to emit a nitrogen spear from her palm that could sever even a steel plate. But…

“?”

“Super nothing is coming out, is it?”

“Wh-what!? What is going on!?”

“Heh. Your power is super reliant on your mechanical arms, right? Well, it seems Hamazura super stuck a bit of gum in the ports inside your cyborg parts to prevent proper contact from being made. Without your arms, you super cannot use your power. Hah hah hah! Now you are a super harmless normal person.”

“I can’t just let that go!! What the hell have you been doing to me while I’m asleep!? And isn’t sticking some foreign object in my body a lot more dangerous than a cavity!?”

“Haahhhh hah hah! Super what are you saying? Academy City’s dark side operates on a survival of the fittest policy. And so let’s super get to the dentist already, temporary Level 0. Resistance is futile, so super give up.”

Tears really could be seen in Kuroyoru’s eyes as Kinuhata Saiai dragged her in through the door of the dentist’s office.

Part 5

The windowless building.

The castle of Aleister, Academy City's board chairman.

It seemed the woman known as Fräulein Kreutune was imprisoned there. Also, Gremlin was trying to acquire her to carry out some objective of theirs while Ollerus's group was prepared to do anything to stop them.

The windowless building was known for being strong, but would it be able to stand up to the likes of those powerful magicians?

It was not being in a known, defended location that mattered for Fräulein Kreutune. It would likely be best for her if no one knew where she was. That was what Kamijou and Thor had to do.

It was simple enough to say.

But…

What that meant was…

"The two of us need to open the way into Academy City's most impregnable fortress and sneak in. *And we need to do it before any of the others can do so,*" said Thor as he sipped on his coffee that had begun to cool. "This is the best option. Gremlin under Othinus's command is of course working to get their hands on Fräulein Kreutune as well. And they know they need to do something about the windowless building to do so. However, they will not rely on tricks. If they decide they need to destroy that building no matter what, they will use unadulterated violence to tear it down."

"…"

"To acquire Fräulein Kreutune, Gremlin will try to smash that building that not even a nuke can destroy. Meanwhile, Ollerus simply has to ensure Gremlin cannot get their hands on her. It is entirely possible they will not even bother entering the building. They might opt to use some curse to kill her from outside."

"I thought she couldn't be killed?"

"So history says. But just because normal methods don't work doesn't mean monsters on Ollerus's level can't pull it off. *I don't know what system Fräulein Kreutune uses to survive*, but they might be able to calculate out a way to kill her if they know. It is best to think that she currently has two blades held at her throat."

On one side was Gremlin who might very well have the firepower needed to destroy a building that could withstand a nuke.

On the other side was Ollerus's group that might very well have the magic ability needed to kill that woman who was so durable the church had given up trying to execute her.

Both sides were made up of veritable monsters.

Both sides held ridiculous levels of power.

But…

At the same time…

"Can we really pull this off?"

"What do you mean?"

"Get into the windowless building. It's supposed to be impregnable, right? Can we really do anything about it?"

"Who knows. I do know that, true to its name, it has no windows or any other type of entrance or exit. Every one of its walls is strong enough to withstand a nuclear attack, and all forms of infrastructure are independently circulated inside the building. When someone or something is needed inside, a teleportation esper is used, but we have to keep in mind your Achilles heel."

"So…"

"In the end, it's a manmade system. And humans have even landed on the surface of the moon. *I have an idea*. All that is left is for us to make up our minds? What will you do?"

"…"

"Just to be clear, I am not your ally. It should be obvious, but I have my own reasons for doing this. So don't worry yourself over pointless doubts about whether I will betray you. I *will* betray you in the end. And yet I am still asking for your help. …You can just abandon me when you feel you no longer need me. *That way we will be even*." Thor shook his paper cup so that the black liquid inside became a small whirlpool. "And no matter what anyone is planning, Fräulein Kreutune herself has done nothing wrong. That alone is clear. It was wrong for her to be forced through the tortures of the witch hunt or to be sealed in a dark room with no exit just because someone else did not like who she was. Don't you agree? Just as I will work towards my own ends, you can betray me as soon as we have safely secured Fräulein Kreutune. Simple, isn't it?"

"…"

"Don't fall silent. Just tell me yes or no," said Thor with a thin smile. "Are you in or not?"

Part 6

Gremlin led by the Magic God Othinus and the group of monsters led by Ollerus had entered Academy City.

They were both after Fräulein Kreutune, the woman imprisoned in the impregnable windowless building.

Gremlin was the group that had caused such a great disturbance in Baggage City and they wanted Fräulein Kreutune "because she was durable". So what exactly would happen to her in their hands?

However, she would not necessarily meet a good end if everything was left to Ollerus's group either as they only wanted to put a stop to Gremlin's conspiracy.

Those two groups would make their move shortly.

They had no time.

"…"

Kamijou wracked his brains based on the limited information he had.

Who would be the best ally in this situation?

It was unlikely Ollerus, Thor, or even Academy City which had been hiding any information on Fräulein Kreutune were disclosing everything about their true motives and objectives. Kamijou was trying to use the information he had received from each party to somehow determine what the actual truth of the situation was that cut a straight line through all the plotting.

And he came to his conclusion.

"…I can't."

"You can't what?"

"I have nothing to substantiate the information you've given me. If Fräulein Kreutune really is imprisoned in the windowless building, that is certainly a problem, *but you have given me nothing to prove that she is even there.*"

"…"

"Also, I just can't bring myself to believe you would betray Gremlin to rescue Fräulein Kreutune. Why would you? If you're part of the group, you must have similar goals. Plus, if you betrayed an organization like that, you could easily meet a horrible fate. So why would you go behind Gremlin's back to speak with me?"

"…"

"I agree with you that Ollerus is not a wholly good person. But is that any reason to see you as my ally? How am I supposed to come to that conclusion? It seems more reasonable to assume everything about Fräulein Kreutune and the attack on the windowless building was a lie and you're trying to lead me to take some actions for some secret plan that-…"

"Hahhhh

Kamijou rolled across the floor, slamming through two or three identically designed tables as he did so.

The students that had been sitting at those tables let out shouts and frantically moved away. The boys and girls far enough away to feel safe initially clicked their tongues at the drinks that almost splashed on them, but their throats grew dry when they saw Thor's face.

As they had never seen anything more than street fights, that was not too surprising.

The violence Thor wielded went beyond the level of a mere murderer.

"Well, if you're going to be so negative about everything, I'll just go do it on my own."

"Gah…Gh…hh…!?"

"Also…"

Whatever those around him may have thought, Thor felt he was still showing quite a bit of calm in his expression as he ignored the onlookers and slowly approached Kamijou.

"Lies? Secret plans? I don't care about any of that. A girl named Fräulein Kreutune is being imprisoned. *That should be enough for you to go save her*. What does it matter if there is more to the story or if someone else has some other goal!? If there is a girl closed up in some dark room being treated cruelly, that should be enough for you to go save her! I thought that was who the 'wonderful enemy' I had imagined was! Was I wrong!?"

Before Kamijou could recover from the shock and stand up, Thor kicked him in the gut. Kamijou's breath burst from his mouth, but Thor jammed his toes into his gut a second and third time.

No one tried to stop him.

And no one tried to flee either. If someone headed for the exit, they might irritate Thor and receive similar treatment. That was why no one there wanted to be first.

"Yes, you may have been used for other people's plans in Hawaii and Baggage City. So what? What does that have to do with Fräulein Kreutune who is suffering now? Are your pathetic experiences enough of a reason to abandon her with a smile on your face!? If you truly think so, there's no hope for you. *The only reason you have just barely managed to get by in a world of experts for this long* is that you have always been acting on a desire to rescue someone even if you did not always succeed in the end. If you lose that, your fist becomes nothing more than a tool for your own selfish desires!! Don't you understand that!?"

The next kick sounded muffled.

This time, Thor's toes had not reached Kamijou's gut. Just before they did, Kamijou had blocked it with both hands.

"…Shut up," said Kamijou Touma with a voice that seemed to come up from the depths of the earth. "How can someone from Gremlin, the ones behind all this, say all that while looking down on me? Not even Leivinia Birdway's plan was this bad. If Gremlin hadn't been going on rampages all over the place, none of this would be happening in the first place! The incident in Hawaii would never have happened, the incident in Baggage City would never have happened, and this incident regarding Fräulein Kreutune would not be happening!!"

"Were you even listening…?"

Thor lightly lifted up his right foot that had been blocked. It looked like he was just trying to remove it from Kamijou's grasp, but instead of going in for another kick, he stomped the foot down on Kamijou's upraised side.

The sound of the impact rang out.

"Gh…bh!? Ghaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?"

"I'm going behind Gremlin's back to put a stop to Othinus and the other's rampage!! The infighting in Hawaii? The destruction of Baggage City? Do you really think everyone in Gremlin supported those things!?"

"Gah…Gfh…"

"I was wondering what Othinus was doing in secret while leaving me out of the loop, and it turned out she was pathetically working at tormenting the weak. Listen up. I have no grand plan. *I just crush those I don't like.* And that's why I have betrayed Gremlin!!"

Thor swung his right leg back and kicked Kamijou in the gut with a similar motion to kicking a soccer ball as hard as one could.

Kamijou rolled a few meters to the side and Thor asked him a question.

"You've acted all full of yourself, but what do you have now? You keep denying other people's opinions and suspecting them, but what does that leave you with? …I don't know if you've gotten drunk on tragedy or if you're just pretending to be clever, but *you are not shining in the slightest right now*. You were better when you were being tricked by everyone around you but were still reaching your hand out to help any crying girl you saw."

"How many people do you think were in danger in Hawaii? Or in Baggage City?" muttered Kamijou.

He grabbed the edge of a collapsed table and slowly stood up.

“I don’t know either. More people than I could count were caught up in those incidents. A single decision by me could have increased or decreased that number!! And this isn’t just a number we’re talking about. These are lives of living human beings! What’s wrong with wanting to be cautious about that kind of thing!?”

“But is your hesitation really so that you can make the best decision?”

A sound like a spark rang out.

Some kind of bluish-white beam of light came from the Lightning God Thor’s fingertips.

This was what his name referred to.

This was the scorching lightning that was similar to an electric arc and could slice through thick steel.

“If it’s really just that you’re afraid of choosing…”

Thor spoke.

“If it’s really just that you’re afraid of having to deal with the consequences of your decision.”

Thor took a step closer.

“*If that is your reason for abandoning someone, then you are a true villain.*”

It came in a horizontal strike.

The bluish-white beam of light grew to about the size of a sword and mercilessly flew towards Kamijou’s neck. The beam explosively expanded. The scattered light melted a toppled table like it was cheese and set some burger wrappers on fire.

But…

That electric arc that could slice through a metal plate over 10 cm thick like it was the paper of a goldfish scoop did not decapitate Kamijou Touma.

This was thanks to his right hand.

Kamijou Touma’s Imagine Breaker blew away the light blade that Thor had used.

“You’re taking me too lightly,” Kamijou said clearly while breathing heavily. “I never had any kind of overarching plan either!!”

Just as it looked like another bluish-white beam of light would appear from Thor's fingertips, Kamijou dashed over and grabbed his right wrist. The blade that could slice through steel disappeared before it could fully form.

Kamijou did not wait.

While Thor was distracted by the vanished blade, Kamijou slammed his knee into his gut.

"Gh…gah!!"

"All I hear is you shouting out whatever crap you like. What I don't like is when I do what I want and someone else uses it to their own ends in some completely different place!!"

With his bent knee still digging into Thor's gut, Kamijou swung his head forward and slammed it into Thor's head.

A dull noise rang out.

"I would stop a fight. Or I would save a crying girl. That was enough for me, but everyone else wouldn't stop carrying on and would eventually lead it to some completely different conclusion!! If 1 plus 1 equaled 2, there wouldn't be a problem. The problem is that it somehow ends up equaling negative 5 or negative 10!! Will this really end up saving Fräulein Kreutune!? Well!? Will it!?"

When he saw that the magician was unsteady on his feet, Kamijou let go of his right wrist and swung his own clenched fist toward the magician's nose.

But Thor blocked it with his left arm.

At the same time, Thor tried to use a leg to sweep Kamijou's feet out from under him. Instead, Kamijou stomped down on the lightning god's foot.

"I'm sick of trying to save someone and only causing more suffering as a result!! That's why I want to be properly prepared before taking action! Why don't you understand that!?"

"Now you've said it…" muttered Thor.

He grabbed Kamijou's collar with both hands.

He lifted Kamijou's entire body up.

Kamijou's feet left the floor.

“Is that why you end up never taking action at all? Because they don’t have some grand title? Because you don’t know them? Because you don’t recognize them? Because you’ve never met them? …You’re wrong, Kamijou Touma. You just gave your own answer. *You just showed what stage you’re having trouble with*. Just realize it already, you dumb bastard!!”

He slammed Kamijou’s back to the ground.

In all seriousness, Kamijou’s breathing stopped for an instant.

And then Thor’s fist fell down upon Kamijou’s face two or three times.

Kamijou did not even know how many blows he had received before he managed to twist his body and just barely avoid Thor’s next blow.

After that, the situation grew utterly confused.

They were both trying to get on top so they could keep the other from moving, but even that simple goal grew uncertain partway through. They would punch, be punched, and then punch again. As the exchange of blows continued, all their complex thoughts were torn from their minds.

It was unclear what exactly caused it, but Kamijou and Thor both suddenly stopped their scuffle. The right third of Kamijou’s vision was blurred. He had no idea how Thor had fared, but he was a member of Gremlin. He surely could have used several pieces of magic that would blow away the entire fast food restaurant. He must have had a reason for not doing so.

As he breathed heavily, Thor asked his question once more.

“*So do you want to help her or not?*”

“*If she really is suffering*,” replied Kamijou while ignoring the people watching on from a distance. “But if you are trying to use me for your own ends like Leivinia Birdway and Kihara Kagun, prepare yourself. I will rescue Fräulein Kreutune even if I have to crush your plan.”

Hearing that, Thor gave a thin smile.

“Do as you wish.”

“?”

“I am taking action tonight. You choose whatever you think the best option is to save Fräulein Kreutune. It doesn’t matter to me if that is to help me or oppose me. …As long as you end up saving Fräulein Kreutune in the end, I don’t care what your methods are.”

Thor placed his hand atop a table that was still standing and wrote something on a paper napkin using a bluish-white beam of light. He showed Kamijou the writing burned into the napkin before tossing it aside. The paper napkin caught fire around the writing and burned away, leaving no trace of the information written there.

He turned his back on Kamijou and spoke softly.

"I will be there. You should be able to use that information to your advantage whether you plan to help me or oppose me."

Between the Lines 2

It used to be that criminal punishments were the greatest form of public entertainment in Western Europe.

After all, this was before the day of basketball and video games. Books did exist at that point, but most people did not know how to read or write. They could always appreciate music and theatre, but the majority of the masses had little opportunity to experience such things.

And so public criminal punishments held in the city square were the greatest form of entertainment because they moved people's emotions in one way or another and would provide a stimulus outside of the normal rhythm of daily life. (Of course, the official reason was so everyone could show their disapproval of the criminal.)

And they did not always simply watch.

In some cases, they would actively participate.

Here is one example.

One possible penalty was public humiliation. It was one of the kinder punishments when compared to being decapitated with an axe or having one's arms and legs broken and tied in a knot using some giant wheel-like objet d'art.

The person being punished would simply be made to stand in the center of the public square with their arms and legs bound and then left there for a certain amount of time. The level of humiliation of the punishment was increased for the severity of the crime committed. Sometimes the person would have their clothes ripped open or be forced to wear a pig mask.

At first glance, public humiliation did not involve any direct violence.

Nothing was done to the criminal beyond the bound hands and legs.

However, there was an implicit understanding that the criminal had no way to stop the masses whatever they might do. These “good neighbors” who were starved for some kind of stimulation would do all sorts of things to the immobile criminal. They would throw stones at him, hit him with sticks, bring human waste from their houses and dump it on him, and otherwise enjoy the “justified punishment”.

And on top of that, the criminal investigation abilities of the time were quite sloppy even when you did not take the infamous witch hunts into account. And the people were well aware of that. They pretended to do what they did because they could not go against the wishes of the authorities, but it can be guessed they felt a dark joy at punishing these people that were not evil but were neighbors they wished to treat as evil.

That was the way of things in that era.

In that era, criminal charges and legends about the criminal were often added after the fact.

There were many stories told of someone who bumped into a wealthy man being beheaded as a legendarily great thief, or a wife criticizing her husband for cheating on her being proclaimed violent due to demon possession and then her decapitated head blinking or a strange plant shaped like a woman growing from the ground where her blood landed. In fact, these stories even made it into official government records, so a lot of information from that age was of dubious accuracy.

And that is why the legends of that woman were buried amid all the other legends.

Fräulein Kreutune.

That woman outlasted 308 of the trials by ordeal that became for the basis of the “confession by torture” method that was later often used in witch hunts.

It did not matter if she was left within great flames for hours on end or forced to hold scorching hot stones in her hands.

It did not matter if she was tossed into a spring with her arms and legs bound.

It did not matter if she was tied to the top of a tower and struck by lightning.

It did not matter if she was left in a cell without food or water for over a month.

Not only did she not die, but her expression did not even change much, if at all. That woman’s true identity and the trick behind her survival could not be determined simply by calling them legends of the day.

The general form of those trials by ordeal was to put the suspected witch through various ordeals. If she was guilty, god would abandon her and she would be harmed. If she was innocent, god would save her and she would not be harmed.

Later, it was decided that trials by ordeal were testing god which was forbidden, so they changed their methods to simply obtaining confessions by torture. However, the trials by ordeal did achieve some results when it came to Fräulein Kreutune.

Ironically, the judges at the time could only come to one conclusion.

Fräulein Kreutune had not been injured and ergo she was innocent and nothing but a mere human.

CHAPTER 3

The Gate Opens.

Impregnable.

Part 1

At a time of day closer to night than evening, Misaka Mikoto found her way to a certain coed high school in District 7.

"So this is that idiot's high school…"

The Ichihanaransai functioned as an open campus for those wanting to check out a certain school, but a local rule of the students said that the true essence of a school was better seen during the preparatory period while all the work was being done than on the day of the festival when everything was decorated and prettied up. There was no official system inviting in students from other schools, but there was an implicit understanding that some would secretly come for a look.

However, there was also a danger of festival spies pretending to be taking a look at the school, so the more prestigious schools had very strict security.

Even so, some dirty members of newspaper clubs would let their journalistic spirit lead them to testing out the level of security at various schools. All in all, there were a lot of different issues surrounding the situation.

But…

(Huh? No one is trying to stop me…)

Misaka Mikoto looked very suspicious as she glanced cautiously around her surroundings near the school gate, but no one looked her way despite several students carrying wood or tools to make stands rushing about.

If she had been within the School Garden, guards would have been chasing after her just for hanging around the fence with a camera hanging from her neck.

She cautiously walked through the open gate and onto the school grounds.

The facility as a whole was on a much lower level than the School Garden or Tokiwadai Middle School, but a high school still seemed like a completely new world for a middle school girl like her.

She felt her legs trembling slightly as she glanced around some more.

Students preparing for the Ichihanaransai were darting about holding tools of the type used for do-it-yourself carpentry. But they were all wearing the same uniform. Mikoto saw no sign of any other students sneaking a peek like her.

(H-hmm… If only there were a lot of other students from other schools. Then I could mix in among them.)

Right after she had that thought…

"Huh? What are you doing here?"

A soprano voice suddenly came from behind her.

Mikoto turned around in surprise and saw a girl with a height of about 135 cm standing there. Mikoto assumed she must be from some other school as well, but for some reason she had a teacher's attendance book held under one arm.

The girl looked carefully up and down Mikoto's outfit.

"Hm? That's a Tokiwadai Middle School uniform, isn't it!? Does that mean you are an unofficial visitor!? You can't do that. You'll get a scolding from Anti-Skill!!"

"Sigh… Thank goodness."

"Eh? What?"

"You're a visitor too, right? I can't believe how out of place I feel here all alone, but I couldn't exactly bring Kuroko or someone with me."

"W-wait a second!! I am not a visitor! I am a teacher!!"

"But…you must be in elementary school. Isn't it a bit soon to be visiting a high school?"

"Are you making fun of me but with perfectly good intentions!?"

Mikoto then visited various areas of the school along with that girl (?) she had met. The school lacked the feeling of strict rules and order that Tokiwadai had, but that lax feeling was quite refreshing for someone who attended a rich girl school like Mikoto.

"It feels like the students have a lot more autonomy than at Tokiwadai. …But how do they keep the school in order with such poor teachers and school rules?"

“Th-the teachers are not poor!! I do an excellent job!!”

“(…But where did that idiot get off to? I wonder where his classroom is.)”

“??? What was that you just muttered?”

“N-nothing!! Don’t worry about it, little girl.”

Mikoto frantically waved one hand to deny she had ever said it.

And then…

A female student with long black hair and a bust plentiful enough to wrap Mikoto in killer intent burst out of the school. She was speaking with someone over her cell phone.

“Dammit!! He ran off even after I told him he had to stay over tonight!? Himegami-san, do you know where that bastard Kamijou Touma went!?”

Mikoto twitched slightly when she suddenly heard that name.

But the situation went well beyond what she could have predicted.

The large-breasted girl speaking with someone over the phone said, “Eh? …He’s been arrested by Anti-Skill!?”

Part 2

And so he was caught red-handed and arrested.

Kamijou Touma had his handcuffs removed upon reaching the Anti-Skill station and was left to shout from a folding chair.

“Ehhh!? W-well, yes. I might have gotten into a fight in that fast food restaurant, but I can’t afford to be doing this right now!!”

“What do you mean ‘doing this’? Now fortunately for you, the witnesses have all told us you were primarily the victim here. Even so, just because everyone is preparing for the Ichihanaransai does not mean your duty as a student changes. You cannot act without restraint like that.”

Kamijou had been thrown into an interrogation room where the window was covered with bars and one wall was covered by a one-way mirror. A middle-aged Anti-Skill man was currently giving him a lengthy scolding. Thor had made a dashing exit before the authorities arrived, leaving the remaining festivities for Kamijou to deal with.

Ultimately, Kamijou exhibited some excellent acting with the line “Uuh…!? I have a blight in my wounds…!!” and managed to escape the Anti-Skill station (while taking on the risk of being charged with perjury). More time must have passed than he thought because the night had grown quite dark.

Due to the Ichihanaransai preparations there were a lot of students out despite the standard curfew having passed.

(The danger from Index is probably at its max for leaving her in the dorm for so long, and the danger from Fukiyose is probably also at its max for skipping out on the preparations.)

But Gremlin and Ollerus’s group were on the verge of getting into a dispute over whether the windowless building that was the heart of Academy City would be destroyed or not. Whichever side Fräulein Kreutune ended up with, Kamijou doubted it would be good news for her. He did not like having to do so, but he had to give that priority.

And so what he had to do was…

“Oh, so you came here after all,” said Thor when he spotted Kamijou at the location he had specified on the napkin.

They were in District 7.

They were in an area filled with abandoned buildings that seemed to be buried by the rest of the cityscape.

Kamijou bluntly said, “I’m going to betray you when I see fit.”

“That’s fine,” said Thor so cheerfully it sounded like he was about to start whistling.

Kamijou looked around and frowned.

“What are those things you have there?”

Some tools of the sort used in do-it-yourself work were lying around the area.

Thor simply replied, “I gathered the things we need to invade the impregnable windowless building. Everyone around here seems to be preparing for some kind of festival, so it wasn’t hard to swipe these.”

Kamijou decided it would be pointless to try to explain the standard rules of society to him, so he just sighed and asked Thor a question.

“We’re up against a building that is supposed to be able to withstand a nuclear blast. It has no entrances or exits. How are we supposed to get in and contact Fräulein Kreutune?”

“There is something else we need to do before I can give you the detailed explanation. Listen up because I’m only going to say this once.”

Part 3

Mugino Shizuri.

Academy City’s #4 Level 5. Her power was known as Meltdowner. Electrons always appeared as either a particle or a wave, but her power let her emit them while they were fixed in a pure state that could not distort into either form. That attack known as the Particle-Function Waveform High Speed Cannon held enough destructive power to slice apart an Aegis ship.

Had she acquired such a power because her personality had been brutal from the beginning or had she gained a brutal personality from acquiring such a power? There may have been no one who could answer to that chicken-and-the-egg question, but there was no mistaking the fact that Mugino Shizuri currently had a personality that befitted the #4 Level 5.

To put it bluntly, she was a girl who knew nothing of housework such as cooking and cleaning.

And yet…

“Hm? …The hell is this? When did I order this? I’ve ordered so many cakes and biscuits lately I’ve lost track.”

Mugino frowned at a cardboard box she found inside the apartment she shared with a boy and a few other girls.

Inside, she found a clear bag filled with a powder that looked like flour, cooking tools such as a silicon spatula, silver-colored molds to be used in the oven, and a manual the size of a notebook.

She peered inside the box while using her left hand to spin around a silver spoon apparently used to measure ingredients.

If the room had been as silent as a music hall, a mosquito-like mechanical buzz could have been heard whenever her fingers moved.

A fight to the death. That phrase may have seemed to have little to do with a Japanese schoolgirl, but Mugino Shizuri had experienced fights like that a few times in the past. In the process, she had lost one eye and one arm. Her face may have looked graceful, but the burns from that time had been restored with special makeup and she had a fake eye. Also, her left arm from the shoulder on had been replaced with a functional fake arm.

The problem this created was the periodic maintenance to correct any errors.

The constant use of the mechanical parts inevitably led to a slight deviation between her actual body and the machine. To correct this, Mugino had to carry out moderate exercises to test out the fine movements of her fingers.

What she used for this was mail order kits for homemade desserts.

She could have written or used chopsticks instead, but cooking was best as it let her use many different movement patterns in a short period.

“Well, it doesn’t really matter. I just need to fulfill my quota.”

Mugino picked up the box she did not recall ordering and brought it to the kitchen. While trying to use her left hand as much as possible, she flipped through the notebook-sized manual. She was completely unaware that this rehabilitation had been another factor alongside the hot chocolate in causing the crisis of Fremea Seivelun’s back teeth.

“…What? What? Prepare saline water with a concentration of 0.9%. Boil the included implements to sterilize them…”

Compared to the other kits she had ordered, this one seemed to have a large number of warnings about keeping things sanitary. But Mugino did not care so long as it let her check on her fake arm. She followed the instructions in the manual by pouring the white powder in the clear bag into a bowl, mixed them together, and whipped the mixture. She poured the resultant substance into the silver mold, put a lid on top, and stuck it into the oven.

“15 minutes at 400 degrees. I can work on a different item during that time.”

She pulled out two containers that were just a bit smaller than ping-pong balls, poured a clear gelatin-like substance inside, and placed them in the refrigerator. She poured a sticky liquid that looked like a mixture of yellow and white into the juicer.

Her arm seemed to be functioning well.

When the oven timer went off, Mugino opened the door and pulled out the metal sheet and what lay on top of it. She used a wet towel to grab the silver mold and opened it from the side like she was opening a long, narrow fountain pen case.

“Hm?”

Mugino then frowned.

A normal girl might have screamed and dropped what she was holding.

"…What is this? *A human bone?*"

While lightly waving around a part that very much looked like a human thigh bone, Mugino gave voice to its identity.

A page flipped over in the manual she had left open.

The new page it was opened to said the following:

"Carry the finished parts to the bath. Sterilize the bathtub and fill it with 0.9% concentration of saline water. Arrange all the parts according to the provided diagram of human anatomy, and wait 45 minutes for the parts to fully attach."

And…

The sticky, cream-colored liquid being mixed in the juicer was fat, the spherical containers just a bit smaller than ping-pong balls cooling in the refrigerator were eyeballs, the object steaming in the pressure cooker was the liver, the object she had used paper towels to suck the moisture out of was the stomach, and the raw pasta-like objects were blood vessels and nerves. Similarly, the remaining "cooking ingredients" were also human body parts.

With a splashing noise, a naked girl rose up from the bottom of the bathtub.

She expressionlessly stared at her own hands and looked a bit puzzled.

She then spoke in French.

"This is smaller than I had expected. You didn't properly use the quantities listed."

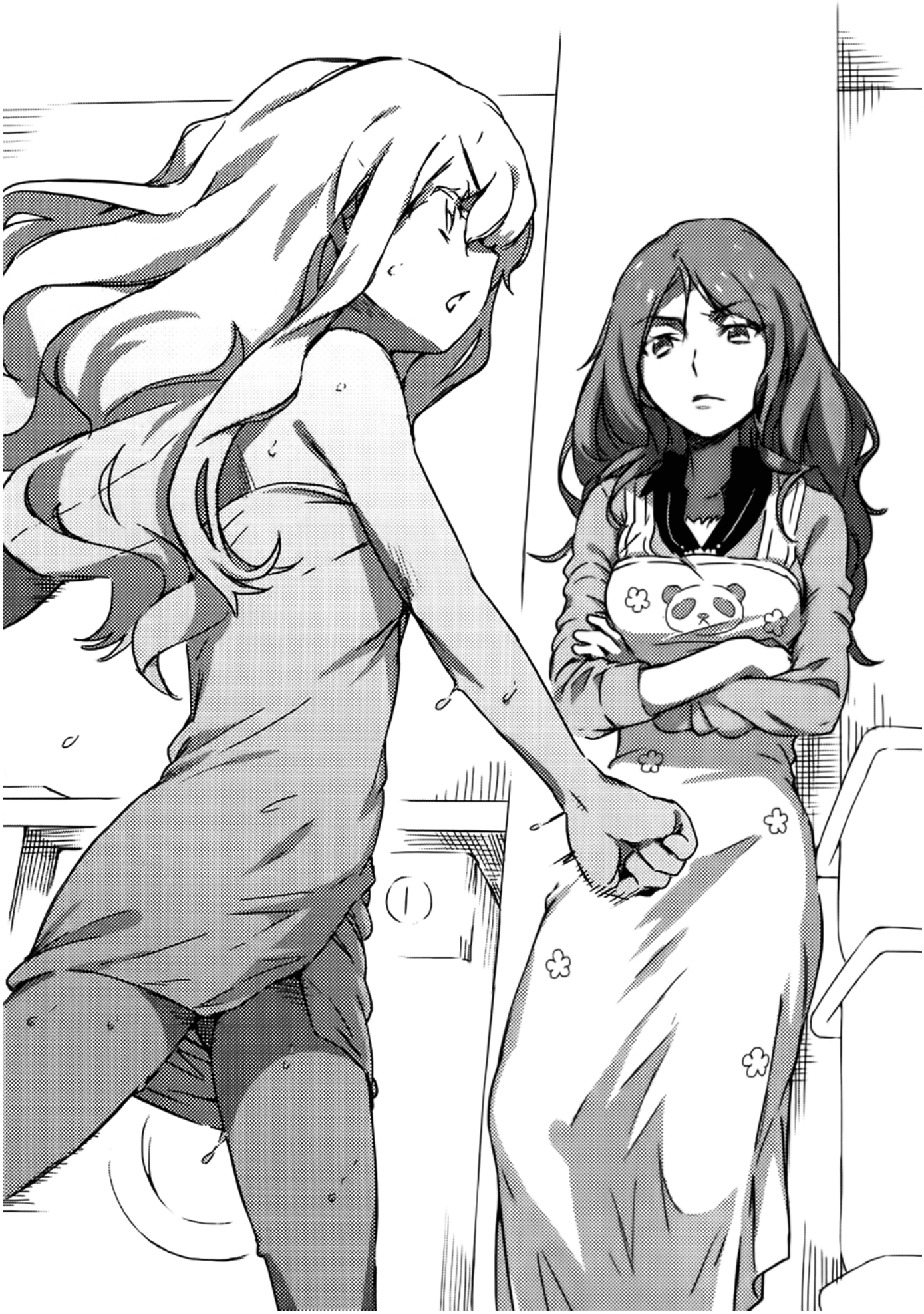
Mugino was leaning against the wall of the changing room with her arms crossed. She understood French, but she spoke to the girl in Japanese nonetheless.

"Who are you?"

"Cendrillon."

The girl with fluffy blonde hair and white skin caught the bath towel Mugino threw at her, wiped the 0.9% concentration of saline water from her body, wrapped it around herself, and left the bathroom.

"Thanks to being turned into a human table by Marian Slingeneyer and returned to human by a man named Ollerus, I am now able to reconstruct myself."



"?"

Mugino initially assumed the girl had misspoken due to speaking in Japanese, but it seemed that was not so.

"The main force of Gremlin has grown more active. They seem to be planning something in Academy City. I decided the most efficient way to do some damage to Gremlin as thanks for betraying me was to contact the group that opposed them in Hawaii."

The bath towel girl who had named herself Cendrillon grabbed the cardboard box that had looked like a mail order cooking kit. The box was divided into a few different layers and she took apart the different layers like it was a sandwich or hamburger.

Inside, she found a large but thin piece of paper.

It looked like the type of pattern used when making clothes.

Starting to get a bit annoyed, Mugino asked, "Is that a design for a dress?"

"Can I ask you for one more favor?" asked Cendrillon without turning around. "First cooking, now sewing. Both are excellent training for being a wife."

Fully pissed now, Mugino Shizuri blew away one corner of the apartment without warning.

The bath towel girl jumped down from the balcony with the pattern paper in hand.

Part 4

Kamijou headed for the center of District 7.

The windowless building was not open to the general public and it was constantly protected by strict security. However, it was not in the middle of some large empty space. It was still in the middle of the city. Buildings such as shopping malls and hotels were built around it.

Based on the instructions Thor gave him, Kamijou was headed for a parking garage located near the windowless building.

However...

“If Anti-Skill or someone even more annoying spots us and we end up on the run, we can’t get this done. We need to split up and meet up at the rendezvous point,” had been Thor’s instructions.

But Kamijou knew none of the details of Thor’s plan. If Thor ended up getting caught, Kamijou would have no idea what to do.

“If that happens, I will find a way to contact you. Then you can do it on your own.”

Kamijou just wished the boy would just tell him what to do from the beginning.

Kamijou lived in District 7, but he was not familiar with the area around the windowless building. Plenty of stores were located there, but he had no real reason to head that far away from his dorm to purchase what he needed to live his everyday life. He could buy the exact same things at more local stores.

“I’m not sure whether to call this area tidy or dreary,” muttered Kamijou as he looked around.

The area was lined with stores filled with items for an everyday life or for entertainment, and nothing looked out of the ordinary at first glance. However, the color of the signs and lights were all uniform. To put it simply, the area was arranged so as not to tire one’s eyes.

That sounded simple enough on its own, but it was up to each individual owner what to do with their private property. That much uniformity over such a large area was rare. Some administrative power would be needed that had enough influence to overpower personal tastes.

In this case, it was obvious what that administrative power was.

The chairman of Academy City’s board of directors.

It was possible that visible arrangement of lights was just the tip of the iceberg and the locations and heights of buildings were controlled in a fashion that fully controlled the flow of people through the area. And it would all be done in a way that was not obvious at first glance.

“Parking garage… Parking garage…”

Kamijou would have been able to easily locate it using the GPS map on his phone, but given what he was about to do, he did not feel particularly inclined to needlessly use a service that could allow a third party to determine his location.

And so Kamijou moved around on foot while glancing around at the signs inconspicuously enough so as not to draw too much attention.

Suddenly, he heard a voice from behind him.

“You bastard!! So this is where you are!!”

“?”

It was a female voice.

When Kamijou turned around with a puzzled look on his face, he found a girl with short brown hair wearing the uniform of the prestigious Tokiwadai Middle School.

She was Misaka Mikoto.

Or more accurately, someone who looked like her.

When she saw his face, she stomped closer to him.

“Why aren’t you at your school to help prepare for the Ichihanaransai? And I hear you were arrested by Anti-Skill. What did you do!? Also, how in the world did you get back to Academy City from Hawaii!?”

Kamijou sighed.

And then shook his head.

“Thor, I’m sick of your jokes.”

“What? Thor???”

“Stop it! Is this really any time to be doing this? Not to mention that you’re the one that said we should stay split up until we reach the rendezvous point!!”

“Wait, I want an explanation for all that other stuff, but what are you talking about?”

The girl seemed utterly bewildered, but Kamijou paid her no heed.

He casually reached out his right hand and touched her upper body with his palm as if he was giving her a shove.

More accurately, he touched the center of the girl’s chest.

“Wha-wha-wha—!?”

“Yes, yes, I’ll destroy that illusion. IDTI, IDTI.”

“Don’t make some nonsensical abbreviation! And where do you think you’re touching me!?”

“C’mon, it’s not like I want to touch something like this!!”

“Something like this…!!!???”

“Don’t go to the pointless effort of making it feel so real. How do you do that anyway?”

“Th-th-these are not pads!!”

Mikoto was left trembling on the spot with an expression distorted by various emotions and her entire body turned beet red.

Kamijou ignored her and started to leave.

“I guess having the spare time to play around is a good thing, but make sure you get to the rendezvous point, Thor. I can’t do anything without you there.”

♦

As he had arrived first, Thor waved one hand when he spotted Kamijou Touma arriving at the parking garage.

“Hey, you’re late. Were you worried about being followed?”

“No, it was because I had to deal with that joke of yours. In fact, how did you get here ahead of me?”

“What?”

Thor looked puzzled, but Kamijou did not notice.

Part 5

Kamijou Touma held a pair of binoculars in one hand.

The windowless building stood at the center of District 7. That giant building was visible from the parking garage.

After Thor had confirmed Kamijou had arrived, he went off somewhere leaving Kamijou alone once more. It seemed he needed to prepare something.

Despite being the castle for the chairman of Academy City's board of directors, the windowless building towered up within the cityscape. Buildings such as hotels and shopping malls were lined up around it. Kamijou was on the 5th floor of a parking garage, leaning over a guardrail meant to prevent cars from falling off the edge.

A small refrigerated truck passed by behind him, heading down the slope.

Thor's earlier words came back to him.

"As its name suggests, the windowless building has no windows or any other kind of entrance or exit. It is completely closed up. No liquid or gas can get in or out, much less a human. X-rays and microwaves cannot get in either. It's almost like a galactic warship sticking up vertically from the ground."

So what were they going to do?

The answer was simple.

"So if we are going to rescue Fräulein Kreutune from that building, our only option is to blow a hole in the wall. That is the premise we must work from."

Another small refrigerated truck passed by behind Kamijou. And it did not end there. Truck after truck headed down the slope.

"Everything we are going to do from here on out is working towards that end. Everything is a necessary expense for destroying the armor of that impregnable windowless building. Do not forget that."

While peering through the binoculars, Kamijou used his other hand to pull out his cell phone.

He was watching the first refrigerated truck that had reached the ground.

He dialed the number he had been given to call Thor.

"The first truck has reached its position."

"Of course it has. I'm using a camera and controller to operate them. That isn't what I asked you to do. How are things around it?"

"There's no one around the windowless building. Just as you predicted."

“Good. …Just to be sure, keep watching until everything is ready. The cameras in the driver’s seats can only turn so far. I need someone watching from above.”

“By the way, what is loaded in those things?”

“You’ll see soon enough. And don’t let your guard down. All of the trucks will be in place in another 10 minutes.”

Kamijou looked around with the binoculars and saw identical refrigerated trucks taking up position near the windowless building.

He saw no sign of the people Thor was worried about.

Not only were there no normal people walking around the area, but there were no dedicated Anti-Skill guards.

“This place is surprisingly defenseless.”

“That’s because of how strong the armor is. Plus, it has no entrances or exits. Even if there were guards, they would have no idea what areas to protect,” replied Thor casually. “And more importantly, posting guards adds the danger of having those guards betray you or allowing someone to disguise themselves as one.”

“It’s not like we could do it, but couldn’t someone try to destroy the ground around the building to make it collapse?”

“There is no official diagram of the building, but the foundation of the windowless building is 15 meters below the surface and it spreads out for quite some distance. The foundation covers something like 3 kilometers in every direction. There are also several thick pillars that head deep underground, so there’s no way that building is falling over. At the very least, burying a nuclear landmine wouldn’t be enough.”

By that point, five or six small refrigerated trucks were parked near the windowless building.

“Everything’s in place. How are things?”

“No change. I can’t see anyone.”

“Understood. Then let’s get this started.”

“Get what started?”

He received no reply.

Instead, Thor took action.

Suddenly, all of the refrigerated trucks positioned outside the windowless building exploded.

"!?"

Even at his distance, the shock was enough to knock Kamijou to the ground. The binoculars and cell phone fell from his hands and slid across the parking garage floor. As he saw black smoke rising up from the surface, Kamijou backed up in a sitting position, and grabbed his phone.

"What the hell did you do!?"

"Can't you tell? I blew them up. I didn't want to do something that would leave a bad taste in my mouth, so I wanted to avoid getting any normal people caught up in the blast."

"Like hell you did." Kamijou grabbed the binoculars, stood up on wobbly legs, and looked around the surface. "What possible good could that have done!? You're the one that told me the windowless building can withstand a nuclear blast! The only damage you did was to the buildings and shops around it. An explosion like that is enough to shatter the windows and injure the people inside!!"

"Oh, shit. I didn't think of that. I wonder if anyone was hurt."

Thor had been using the cameras inside the refrigerated trucks to gather information on the area while remote controlling the trucks. The explosion had destroyed those cameras, so he could no longer see what was going on.

That was why Kamijou gave into his anger and made an announcement.

"It went just like I thought it would. I don't know what you had in those trucks, but it wasn't enough to destroy the armor of that building that can withstand a nuclear blast. Your plan failed!!"

"That armor is known as the Calculate Fortress. …Fortunately, this went exactly as I expected it to. The first stage of the plan is complete."

"What?"

"Don't worry about it and come back here. The plan to rescue Fräulein Kreutune is going just fine. Oh, and I sent a map to your phone. Follow the route on there on your way back. Otherwise, you'll be followed. If that happens, I won't meet back up with you. Understand?"

Part 6

A magic spell has been cast.

Kumokawa Seria was revived!

“Oh, what’s this, what’s this? Has the shut-in been drawn out by the festive mood?” said a girl walking along a footpath at night.

That comment was made by Kumokawa Maria, a girl wearing a crazy maid uniform colored yellow and black like a bee or a railway crossing. She must have been preparing for the Ichihanaransai like all the other students because she was carrying a cardboard box filled with perishable food.

She happened to be Seria’s younger sister.

The older sister wore an unfashionable school uniform and she scratched at her black hair in annoyance while showing no real change in mood due to her sister’s comment.

“No, I’m not completely back yet. It’s just that everyone else won’t shut up about it being my turn.”

“Are you talking about the beauty contests being held at various schools for the Ichihanaransai? Are you being left in charge of wearing the most shocking swimsuit? You damn G! Have you grown even more!?”

“I’m not entering any beauty contests. Yawn… My role is always behind the scenes, so I don’t like standing out too much. And what’s the point in entering anyway? That annoying #5 will just use her powers to manipulate the votes.”

“Are you trying to say you don’t already stand out a lot? Then how much more of an aura do you have left in reserve?”

Unable to keep up with the excitement of Maria, Seria rubbed her eyes sleepily.

“I think that’s just a difference in chest size.”

“Don’t look down on me while acting so tired! You damn G! People who have too much in that regard get so arrogant just like how winning the lottery changes people…”

“Yeah, but there would have to be something severely wrong with a world that let flat-chested girls look down on well-endowed girls.”

“Here’s a little piece of trivia for you. In the day of the Greeks they had no bras, so having a flat chest was a status symbol. Large breasts would sag and no one wants to see that.”

“Yes, but that no longer applies in this day and age. And you act like having a flat chest was a virtue, but works like the Venus de Milo make it pretty obvious they thought you needed a bare minimum size even back then. All in all, isn’t it nice to have a size that allows you to complain about how limited your options for a swimsuit are?”

“I’ve complained about that before. …But for the opposite reason.”

“Oh, is that so?”

There was a note of melancholy in Kumokawa Seria’s tone because she really did not want to look at the mailbox on her beloved handheld device. It was likely filled with annoying issues regarding Academy City.

In fact, the light indicating an incoming email was continually flashing even then. The city must have been in some kind of dangerous situation yet again.

(Well, I never once made an official announcement that I was working again, so I can ignore it.)

Her normal “work” was to act as the brain of an old man on the board of directors. She would come up with ideas and suggest solutions for those difficult problems. However, she did not particularly enjoy the work. Or at the very least, she did not enjoy getting an extra-large serving on the house without ordering it.

As such, she used all her might to avert her gaze from those real problems.

“Little sister, about that Kihara Kagun you love so much that he gives you nosebleeds…”

“I-I do not get nosebleeds. I know how to control myself!!”

“Anyway, what would you think if that Kihara Kagun announced he was a flat chest lover and refused to accept anything larger than a B as breasts? Assume this announcement is made with enough force to befit a ‘don!!’ sound effect.”

“…” Kumokawa Maria thought back to her time with that former teacher of hers when he had worked as a Student Keeper. “I-I wouldn’t want him to accept me like that. It would hurt my pride so much I would likely lose all trust in other human beings.”

“You see? So keep working at it, young one.”

“Work at it? But I don’t know anything I can do about it that doesn’t amount to superstition.”

“Don’t worry. You have not fully bloomed yet. You still have the proper nature hidden deep within you like something from a shounen manga. Something like this.”

“Hey!! You damn G! Don’t show those off to me with such a triumphant look on your face!!”

All older sisters had the ability to casually brush aside the anger of their younger sister.

Kumokawa Seria brought a hand to her mouth, let out a loud yawn, wiped away the tears that appeared in the corner of her eyes, and then suddenly realized something.

“By the way, I have a serious question for you. Is it true you fell in love with Kamijou Touma in Eastern Europe? If so, it’s time for full-on soap opera mode.”

“Th-that’s defamation of character!! Where did you hear that rumor!?”

Part 7

The new rendezvous point was on the grounds of a shopping mall near the windowless building. It was not actually within the building; it was in an outside corner lined with vending machines.

The nighttime scenery was colored by flashing red lights because of the fire trucks dotting the area. One must have been borrowing the firefighting equipment of the shopping mall because a thick fire hose was connected to a pump-like valve on the wall.

Mixed in with some onlookers, Thor approached the vending machines while sipping on a can of coffee. He gave a thin smile upon spotting Kamijou Touma.

“Does this country not have any decent coffee?”

“…If you don’t like it, then don’t buy it,” said Kamijou in annoyance. “More importantly, explain yourself. You certainly put on quite a show, but you haven’t put a scratch on the windowless building. You said that was a success. What the hell are you-…”

Thor held his index finger to his own lips to cut off Kamijou.

He then whispered, “Let’s talk while we walk. There is a reason I have been unable to give a proper explanation of my plan.”

“…”

Kamijou and Thor began walking away from the crowd of onlookers.

“To start with, Academy City’s higher ups have created a surveillance network that allows them to monitor every little thing that happens in every corner of the city. That has prevented me from explaining my plan in full.”

“Are you talking about satellites and security robots?”

“I don’t know how many projects are being run in parallel in this city, but those wouldn’t be enough to cover all the blind spots. I think there is some other surveillance network using *some much more nasty technology* that has not been revealed to the public.”

The true identity of that surveillance network was the Underline data-gathering nanodevices that had been disseminated throughout Academy City, but only a very small group of people such as Accelerator and Tsuchimikado Motoharu were aware of its existence.

“But,” added Thor, “whatever this technology is, we are not the only ones that do not like having it around constantly. …And so there are places like this.”

Saying that, Thor opened a metal door located beneath an overpass. It looked like an area meant to store cleaning equipment, except it had yet another door inside. That door led to a long, cold passageway.

Kamijou frowned as he peered inside the dim passageway illuminated by flickering fluorescent lights.

“…What is this?”

“It belongs to the Freshmen. Or rather, it is the hidden base of the dark side organization that produced them. To carry out their shadowy acts behind the scenes, they needed bases to carry out specialized maintenance. This is one of those places. It is a blank spot in Academy City’s surveillance network. And yet it is located almost directly above the underground foundation of the windowless building.”

However, Kamijou and Thor had not gone through the normal preparations the Freshmen would have used. They would have effectively disappeared from the surveillance network, so someone would be sent out to investigate before long.

They could only use the area for 20 or so minutes.

“You’re from the magic side, so why do you know more about this than a resident of the city like me?”

“The Freshmen were Gremlin’s potential enemy. We made sure to investigate our enemy. Also, we had an excellent source of information on the city.”

“?”

“Bersi. As Kihara Kagun, he used to be a researcher within Academy City,” explained Thor as they walked down the long passageway.

Bersi.

Kihara Kagun.

The man at the center of the disturbance in Baggage City. Kamijou Touma had been guided to Baggage City by that man in order to "clean up" after him.

Thor grinned and said, "Blowing up those refrigerated trucks was also so I get some help from Bersi."

"What are you talking about? I thought he was dea—"

"For a long, long time, Bersi's goal was to take revenge upon a researcher named Kihara Byouri," said Thor, cutting him off. "And he planned out ways to combat her in places other than just Baggage City. As it was possible he would end up confronting her in Academy City, he set up a few tricks before leaving the city. I guess you could call them backdoors."

"…"

"This is the place. Come on in."

Thor opened up a metal door partway down the passageway and invited Kamijou in like it was his own house. Inside was a small room with no furniture. A household power outlet and internet cable jack were installed on the wall.

Thor pulled a handheld device out of his pocket and connected a cable into the jack on the wall.

"The armor covering the windowless building can withstand a direct hit from a nuke. But it is not simply that the Calculate Fortress is especially hard. If you built a high-rise building out of too hard a material, it would crack during earthquakes due to having no way to let the shaking escape."

"Then how does it do it?"

"It uses electromagnetic waves or ultraviolet rays to calculate the pattern of the approaching shockwave and then the mobile armor plates carry out the optimum vibration. Basically, the two waves cancel each other out. That is why there is no point in trying to defeat it in a simple contest of strength. Naturally, it has other countermeasures against all types of chemicals and high or low temperatures."

Once the handheld device had connected to the network, Thor began doing something. Kamijou took a peek at the screen, but he had no idea what it meant as all he could see were countless strings of numbers scrolling by. The display was clearly not designed for general users.

"But at the same time, the Calculate Fortress is not all that strong in and of itself. If the intellectual portions fail to activate, a direct explosion is enough to blow a hole in it."

“But the windowless building’s power is supplied from the inside, right?”

“Yes, so we can’t cause a power outage,” readily admitted Thor. “And so we need to tackle this from a different direction. That was what I blew up those trucks for. Simply put, I gathered some data from when the Calculate Fortress cancelled out the impact of the explosions in order to calculate out some ‘idiosyncrasies’ of the machine. The strength and direction of each explosion was different.”

“…What can we do once we know these ‘idiosyncrasies’?”

“We calculate out a shockwave pattern that the armor cannot fully escape. If we then carry out an attack following that pattern, we can open a hole in that building that not even a nuke can destroy.”

“I doubt you can calculate that out using a household computer.”

“And that’s why I’m leaving the heavy lifting to some bigger computers.” Thor lightly waved the handheld device as countless strings of numbers scrolled by at high speed. “Do you remember Bersi…or rather, Kihara Kagun’s backdoors that I mentioned? He set up free pass IDs in the supercomputers of a few research facilities. I’m having those do the predictive calculations. Of course, those will be closed to us after we use them here, the same as this secret base.”

After about 15 minutes, the results of the calculations displayed themselves.

They had the equation required to break through the impregnable Calculate Fortress that protected the windowless building.

With that in hand, Kamijou Touma and the Lightning God Thor headed on to the next phase of the plan.

Part 8

Kamijou and Thor headed through Academy City using the remains of the research facility that had produced the Freshmen, an organization within the city’s dark side.

They held bags filled with power tools. They were the tools Thor had stolen.

“The board chairman likely relies on the accuracy of his personal surveillance network and the Calculate Fortress. As they will not betray him, he can trust them more than a human. But there is no such thing as a perfect system. If we can get close enough to the windowless building without him detecting us, we can apply a fatal wound to his security system.”

"…"

"Hm? Don't worry. I haven't forgotten our objective. We're here to rescue Fräulein Kreutune. But don't forget that it isn't over once we get her out of the windowless building. In fact, hiding her from the magicians in Gremlin's main force and Ollerus's group will probably be the hardest part. If we take a detour here, we'll just end up being ganged up on from all sides. *To be honest, it pains me we can't do more here, but this is no time to get greedy*."

Kamijou and Thor stopped in front of a ladder attached to the wall.

When he looked straight up, Kamijou could see a round exit.

"Is that a manhole?"

"It comes out right next to the wall of the windowless building. But once we exit from there, the board chairman's surveillance network will be able to pick us up once more. Not to mention that he's likely already begun investigating Kihara Kagun's backdoors. If he figures out what we were calculating using the super computers, he will do whatever he can to stop us."

"How long do you think we have until that happens?"

"Ten to twenty minutes. But that should be enough. We can still open a hole in the rumored Calculate Fortress."

Kamijou double-checked the weight of his bag filled with power tools.

Once they climbed up the ladder and opened the manhole, there was no turning back.

He had to be fully aware of that before he could continue on.

"Let's go," said Kamijou.

"That's more like it."

What connection was there between Fräulein Kreutune and Kamijou Touma?

It did not matter.

After all…

They were not walking down that path to earn anyone's thanks.

They were simply going to save someone who needed their help.

Part 9

Dinner that night was mizutaki.

“To make chicken seem as extravagant as possible, you have to go with a nabe,” said Yoshikawa Kikyou as she spun the small gas cylinder for a portable stove in her hands.

Her specialty was in pharmaceuticals, genetic engineering, and other clone-related technologies, and she had once worked on the military Radio Noise project.

She lived in a teacher’s apartment, but the apartment was not leased in her name. She was living with an Anti-Skill member she knew.

Exceedingly unfortunately, Yoshikawa Kikyou was currently unemployed.

Incidentally, a few other freeloaders lived in that apartment in addition to her.

For example, there was the girl called Last Order who looked to be about 10 and was swinging around a nunchuk-shaped wireless controller while jumping around on the couch.

“Ohhhhhh!! You can’t have Snow White, says Misaka as Misaka makes her announcement!! Misaka has seen no proof that Snow White will be happy if she goes with the prince, says Misaka as Misaka-...!!!!!!”

“Okay, it’s time for dinner.”

“Misaka just got to a good part, says Misaka as Misaka protests your timing! Communication is important in a network game, so you can’t log out at a bad stopping point!! says Misaka as Misaka explains the basics!!”

“But your account’s friend list is filled with nothing but Misakas. Isn’t this just a more over-the-top way of playing on your own?”

Former researcher Yoshikawa Kikyou looked puzzled as she recalled the roles played by the mass-produced military espers and their control tower.

Also, the fairy tale art style and the cute star and heart effects looked nice enough at first, but a closer examination showed seven dwarfs using agricultural tools like axes and hoes to beat up a prince on a white horse. Yoshikawa wondered if the game had been given a motif of the peasants revolting.

“Hey,” said Yoshikawa to the white-haired, red-eyed Level 5 lying on the other sofa positioned at a right angle from the one Last Order was jumping around on.

His name was Accelerator.

As the modern cane placed nearby and the choker-style electrode around his neck suggested, he was not in perfect condition, but even so, he still held the position of strongest as Academy City's #1.

But at the same time…

"I can never figure out how to deal with that girl. You're her guardian, you deal with her."

"…Why the hell would I do that? If we start eating, that brat will come join us on her own. Making her feel left out works better than trying to flatter her or order her around."

"You sure do know her well."

"Do you want me to punch your face in?"

Ignoring Accelerator's glare, Yoshikawa Kikyou stuck the gas cylinder in the portable stove and fixed it in place. She turned the ignition lever two or three times as a test and confirmed that it was creating a ring of blue flames.

A girl called Misaka Worst (evil look in the eyes, large breasts) also lived there as a freeloader, but she was a delinquent girl who loved the nightlife, so she was almost never back by dinner time.

The #1 frowned in displeasure and asked, "Where's the head of the household?"

"Aiho is out patrolling streets as patrols have been strengthened this week. The curfew restrictions are temporarily repealed due to the Ichihanaransai."

"…So what are you doing?"

"Training for being a wife!! …or so I'd like to say, but these days the wife has a job too and the housework is shared."

"That *would* be ideal."

"You're hardly one to talk," said Yoshikawa in annoyance. "But I do realize I can't stay like this forever. Unlike you kids, I live in the society of adults, and that means a blank spot in my life is a very bad thing."

"Have you found somewhere to work?"

"No, but I am working on the preparations." Yoshikawa grabbed an A4-sized envelope from the ground and waved it around. "I've been invited as a special lecturer at a college of science. It's only temporary, though. I can make a bit of money and make the preparations I need to get myself back into a college."

"Why?"

“I want to be a teacher but not one related to genetics. I doubt I can get to be a homeroom teacher in a school, but the hurdle is much lower for a Student Keeper. …You don’t need a teaching license for that. It seems they even hire normal people from companies. …Hm?”

Yoshikawa stopped moving all of a sudden.

She had been working on preparing the nabe, but now she looked around, headed into the overly high level kitchen, and rummaged through the shelves.

“We don’t have any green onion for flavor. Well, we can still eat the mizutaki without it.”

“Oh!!!!!!”

Yoshikawa heard an explosion of noise.

It had come from Last Order while she was taking a break after having attacked in a group of seven, beaten up the prince on the white horse, and stolen his crown and mantle.

“Misaka can go buy some for you!! says Misaka as Misaka makes her announcement!!”

“Guardian, you deal with this.”

“Don’t just turn this over to me…”

Last Order was not some puppet programmed to enjoy running errands. She clearly wanted to head out and see Academy City at night as well as enjoy the different world created by the Ichihanaransai preparations.

“But aren’t you the one with the tightest hold on her reins? To be honest, I sometimes can’t keep up with her line of reasoning at my age.”

“I have a hold on her reins? What the hell are you talking about? You make it sound like I’m a little brat like her too.”

“Okay, now hand the money over to Misaka! says Misaka as Misaka holds out her hand!!”

“Hmm… Or maybe she holds your reins. Well, either way, you are definitely the person with the closest connection to her.”

“…Sometimes I get the feeling you want someone to kill you. Do you never think what might happen to you to pay for those mocking comments?”

“Says Miiisaaakaaa!!”

“Come to think of it, what are you going to do during the Ichihanaransai? I assume you’re going to go around with that girl.”

“What do you mean ‘you assume’?”

“…”

Accelerator and Yoshikawa Kikyou suddenly realized Last Order’s shouting that had been louder than a siren had disappeared.

They turned around to find no one there. The front door was sitting half open as it was caught on a shoehorn lying on the floor, and the smallest pair of shoes usually lined up there was missing.

Yoshikawa Kikyou put one hand on her hip, lightly touched her temple with the other hand’s index finger, closed one eye, and sighed.

Then she said, “Take care of it, guardian.”

“Oh, fuck you!!”

Part 10

The manhole opened.

First, a bag filled with power tools was pushed up onto the surface and then Kamijou Touma appeared into the night.

Thor shouted from below.

“Hurry! We only have 10 to 20 minutes!!”

They were right next to the windowless building. Before Thor could even crawl out of the manhole, Kamijou ran up next to the wall of the windowless building. He used a red pen to draw a large circle on the Calculate Fortress.

As it could supposedly withstand even a nuclear weapon, he had imagined it being as hard as diamond, but when he touched it with the tip of the large pen, it felt more like a thick rubber panel. That may have been because it distributed or let escape any shock or impact rather than deflecting it.

Or…

Perhaps the Calculate Fortress only seemed flexible due to the offsetting waves running through it and it actually was made of a material that was as hard as diamond.

(Thor said it had other countermeasures for chemicals and high heat… This thing doesn't have nanodevices covering it, does it?)

Kamijou turned around and shouted.

"I've marked it!"

"Ready your jackhammer! I've already inputted the impact pattern calculated out by Kihara Kagun's backdoors!!"

Thor had already put together the power tool from his bag. It was shaped like a machine gun, but it had a giant spike in place of the barrel. Rather than opening a hole with a single "thrust", the tool would break down the wall with hundreds or even thousands of repeated impacts.

Holding his jackhammer, Kamijou slid the lithium ion battery Thor tossed him into the bottom like it was a magazine.

Thor held his own jackhammer in the same way and said, "Press the spike to the wall along the line you drew. Then you just have to pull the trigger. That will activate the jackhammer. Keep pressing it in even after the wall starts cracking. Pull it out once the spike is driven in all the way to the base and do the same at a point a short distance away along the line. Understand!?"

Kamijou and Thor pressed the ends of their jackhammers against points at about three o'clock and 9 o'clock of the circle and pulled the triggers that had a bit of resistance to them.

A deafening rattling noise rang out.

A dull pain exploded in Kamijou's shoulder as the stock struck him there again and again and again, but he could see the tip of the thick spike truly starting to sink into the armor of the supposedly impregnable windowless building.

It would not be going too far to call it a historical moment.

Not even Accelerator, Academy City's strongest Level 5, had been able to cause that destruction.

"It's going in!!"

"But our pace is too slow!! At this rate, I'm not sure we can open a hole in time!!"

Also, the noise was much louder than Kamijou had expected.

Thor had just recently blown up several refrigerated trucks to gather data. The firefighters were still working in the area.

“They’re going to notice this!! If the firefighters spot us, they’ll interfere!! We’ll never finish in 10 to 20 minutes if that happens!!”

“The firefighters won’t be able to hear it over their own sirens. They won’t notice us that easily!! The real problem is that this armor is cleverer than I had expected. Dammit, how is it still this hard after we calculated out the theoretical values!?”

Kamijou then heard a noise that sounded like a gear breaking.

Thor clicked his tongue, stopped his jackhammer, and pulled it out from the armor. The thick spike had broken off halfway down.

“I’m going to swap out the spike!! You keep working. We can’t lose any more time!!”

“Do you have spare parts!?”

“I brought enough parts to put together an entire spare jackhammer in case one broke. But that means this is our only spare spike. Don’t break yours!!”

Not only was the planned portion not going as planned, but now they had experienced an unforeseen accident. Kamijou’s unease rapidly grew.

Would it all end like that?

This was the castle of the chairman of the board of directors, the person who acted as the head of Academy City. Had it been wrong for just the two of them to challenge the Calculate Fortress that protected it?

But even so, turning tail and running would not make anything better.

It was self-evident that the only way to escape their predicament was to continue on forward.

Kamijou had a feeling that reasoning was the same as someone who kept gambling after doing nothing but losing, but he could not come up with any other answer no matter how clever he tried to be.

Kamijou forced down his unease and pressed the jackhammer further in.

After creating holes at 3 o’clock and 4 o’clock along the large circle he had made, he moved the tip of the jackhammer to 5 o’clock. But that was when something happened.

“…What?”

At first, Kamijou thought something had happened to the jackhammer he held. A new and somehow odd noise was mixed in with the usual deafening sound it made.

“Thor! Something’s wrong. I think mine might have broken, too!! Is your jackhammer not fixed yet!?”

But Thor did not respond.

Kamijou shouted again while still facing the Calculate Fortress.

“Thor!!”

Kamijou turned around to see why Thor was not responding.

Thor was supposed to be swapping out the spike, but he was instead crouching down holding the broken jackhammer while looking up. His eyes were opened wide. It looked like he was trying to see something beyond the darkness of the night sky.

No.

He was not just trying.

Thor really had spotted something heading their way from the night sky. Something that overturned all the previous assumptions and that made him completely forget about their goal of breaching the Calculate Fortress.

“…Not good.”

“What is it!? My jackhammer has started making a weird noise! I know nothing about jackhammers, so just hand yours over to me once you swap out the spike!! You can check mine over to find out what’s wrong with—!!”

“No!! There’s nothing wrong with your jackhammer!! That’s the sound of a group Academy City unmanned weapons heading this way!!”

Without thinking, Kamijou let his finger off the jackhammer’s trigger.

The impacts against his shoulder stopped and the deafening noise ended.

Nevertheless, he could hear an approaching noise that was just as deafening as the jackhammer. And this noise was obviously not coming from the jackhammer.

Red and green lights could be seen dancing through the air, but Thor seemed to see them as more than points of light.

“Those must be low-cost versions of the Six Wings model. To follow the naming scheme, I guess these would be Four Wings. It looks like they’re even more maneuverable after trimming the fat.”

“What are you talking about!?”

“Unmanned attack helicopters. They use sonic weapons to stop any human resistance and then use machine guns and missiles to finish them off. They’re about as horrible as you can get!!”

The number of lights visible told them this was more than just one. However, even a single craft would have been a death sentence for Kamijou. He was powerless against that kind of violence that had nothing to do with the supernatural.

“Those things are unmanned right!? So no one’s aboard. Thor! Can’t you do something with your magic!?”

“I could, but we don’t have time to play around!! Also, I don’t want Gremlin or Ollerus to detect it. If we can’t breach the Calculate Fortress, this will all have been for nothing. The more time we lose, the faster the situation’s downwards spiral will accelerate. We don’t have time to deal with those things!!”

They could hardly just do nothing and get shot, but they did not have time to deal with the enemy either.

Their escape route had finally disappeared.

At the current rate, Kamijou and Thor would be unable to rescue Fräulein Kreutune and also be blown to pieces. The path they were headed down led straight to the worst possible scenario that had not even the smallest hope left.

“Thor, if we can’t deal with those helicopters, we need to fall back.”

“But then we lose any chance of getting Fräulein Kreutune out of there! We can’t use the Freshmen’s underground facility again and the impact pattern that hits a blind spot in the Calculate Fortress will be covered up with a security patch to the defense program!! We aren’t going to get another shot at this!!”

“Your plan has failed! If we’re killed here, there will be no one left who even wants to rescue Fräulein Kreutune!!”

“Once Gremlin or Ollerus make their move to secure Fräulein Kreutune, we will truly have no way of intervening. And she will not meet a kind fate no matter which side secures her!!”

“Dammit!!” cursed Kamijou as he pulled the trigger of his jackhammer once more.

But they were not able to come up with any other idea in time.

The situation was changing by the moment and yet they had no cards left to play. Kamijou and Thor could only try to scrape by with the what they had just barely managed to save up. Once the situation exceeded a certain level, they would not have enough to keep up.

And…

That moment came.

Kamijou heard an odd noise and this time it really was coming from the direction of the jackhammer in his hands. It was the sound of a crack running through hard metal.

He thought it was the spike breaking just like Thor’s had.

But he was wrong.

A giant crack was running through the wall of the windowless building.

This crack ran beyond the large circle Kamijou had drawn on the wall with a large red pen.

The destruction seemed to extend forever.

It created a perfect square over 10 meters across.

The impregnable Calculate Fortress fractured along that line that was obviously artificially created. Having lost its support, the giant wall collapsed toward Kamijou.

“What…!?”

Kamijou let go of the jackhammer and frantically jumped to the side to avoid the wall. The thick remnant of the wall bent, crushed, and utterly destroyed the unrefined jackhammer that was still sticking into it. The remains of the wall slammed into the ground and sent dust shooting up into the air. The Calculate Fortress was supposed to be indestructible, so the dust must have come from the asphalt below.

(That crack didn’t come from our jackhammers. That went well beyond what we wanted. So what caused it? I thought the wall could cancel even a nuclear bomb with the exception of the impact pattern we calculated out using Kihara Kagun’s backdoors!)

Nothing other than their jackhammers could have damaged the wall from the outside.

And Kamijou doubted the defenses were lax enough to allow natural-forming cracks to form due to deterioration or metal fatigue.

So…

Had that artificial destruction come from the inside?

And if so…

By who?

"…"

Thor stared into the dust.

He stared into the dim interior of the windowless building through the hole in the Calculate Fortress.

Someone stood inside.

Who was it?

Kamijou and Thor could hear the footsteps of this person who stood before them. But it was not the hard sound of leather shoes or boots. It was the softer sound like that of someone pressing their palm against a glass table. Whoever it was may have been barefoot.

The person's skin came into contact with the dust-filled outside air.

The person exited the building.

It was a woman, but she was rather tall for one. She was almost 2 meters tall. Her silver hair was so long it reached her ankles, and her head was lowered so the hair obscured her expression. She wore what looked like a dress made of a thin synthetic fiber, but she did not seem too concerned about how she looked. Her underwear was perfectly visible through the thin material, but she showed no sign of caring. Her white skin looked like that of a teenage girl, but it was hard to tell what age she actually was.

On some fundamental level, she did not look like a fellow human being.

She had no obvious inhuman elements such as horns or wings. If he had been asked what about her seemed inhuman, Kamijou would not have been able to give a clear answer. However, there was clearly something off about her even if it was difficult to describe with words. No one would find it odd to see skin that glossy on a teenage girl in a sauna. However, it would be a completely different story if a girl like that was discovered in an ancient pyramid. There was nothing wrong with the girl herself, but there seemed to be something distinctly out of place in the air around her.

(Who is she…?)

Kamijou wondered that in his heart.

And then he wondered why he had not spoken his question aloud.

Later, he would realize he had felt as if he was facing a carnivorous beast that had escaped its cage. He wanted to avoid providing any kind of provocation before he knew what was going on.

(She came out of the windowless building…so could this be the mysterious head of Academy City? Is this the chairman of the board of directors…?)

But Kamijou Touma's guess was incorrect.

Having completely forgotten about the 10 to 20 minute time limit and the approaching unmanned attack helicopters, Thor stared at the woman blankly.

"…Fräulein…Kreutune…?" he muttered.

Immediately afterwards, the person Thor had named glanced over at him through the gaps in her silver hair.

She tilted her head to the side as if trying to work out the solution to some question.

And then…

An odd noise escaped Thor's lips and he collapsed to the ground along with a dark, red liquid.

Kamijou was completely unable to comprehend what had happened despite watching from so close by.

Even if it was some unknown attack and even if it had been a complete surprise, an official combat member of Gremlin, the group that had caused so much chaos in Baggage City, had been downed in a single blow.

It seemed Thor was trying to move his arms and legs while collapsed on the asphalt, but he quickly reached his limit. He just barely managed to make his fingertips tremble slightly. It looked like an insect desperately trying to move a leg that was almost completely ripped off.

"Thor!!" shouted out Kamijou without thinking as he ran over to the other boy.

But there was nothing he could do.

He had turned Fräulein Kreutune's attention to himself. That alone may have been a fatal mistake.

Unlike with Thor, the woman did not even glance in Kamijou's direction.

Kamijou Touma heard a muffled sound burst from what seemed to be his lungs, and the next thing he knew, his vision was spinning.

Between the Lines 3

Crisis Management File Special Provision #4431119.

Matters of concern regarding the maintenance of Fräulein Kreutune.

The primary object is to keep the above mentioned person's effect on the world to a minimum as she will become an impediment to the Plan related to Academy City and the entire world. However, killing her would prove difficult given her nature. For that reason, our plan is to box her up like a cat so that her effects outside the box are diluted as much as possible.

The matters of most pressing concern regarding this plan will now be specified.

The driving force behind her is curiosity as opposed to an ideology. As such, we must prevent her from becoming curious concerning the outside world. As she cannot be killed no matter what is done to her, she will head for the object, situation, place, or person of interest no matter how much it would destroy her physical body.

She is being kept in an impregnable box surrounded by the Calculate Fortress, but her nature makes that an uncertain prison at best.

The most effective method would be to surround her in perfect darkness and perfect silence to eliminate any possible source of curiosity.

She has no concept of like or dislike.

She will display all types of curiosity towards whatever draws her interest whether that is for the good or ill of said target.

Once sealed inside the box, even the slightest light, wave, or noise will likely cause curiosity to well up within her. While one or two sporadic incidences may pose no threat, any stimulus that continues for longer than one minute would be especially dangerous.

We must not provide even the slightest change to her environment.

Once she is activated, she will likely use her high-speed thoughts to construct a means of breaking through the Calculate Fortress.

Also, once she obtains a means of breaking through the Calculate Fortress, no normal means will be able to kill or stop her.

If she is released into Academy City with both means of offense and defense, she is to be seen as a Code Red-level threat.

CHAPTER 4

Peace Seen From a Strange Form.

Release_Monster.

Part 1

Kamijou Touma heard the sound of something exploding.

His consciousness had been flickering in and out, but that noise acted as a lifeline allowing his consciousness to rapidly surface.

"…What…?"

"Are you awake now?"

Thor was peering down at his face. He had coughed up blood the same as Kamijou, but his symptoms seemed to have been lighter than Kamijou's.

They were still right next to the windowless building. The giant hole broken through the Calculate Fortress was still there. Their time limit had supposedly been 10 to 20 minutes, but Kamijou did not know how much time had passed.

He learned what had happened from Thor.

"The Four Wings unmanned attack helicopters were all brought down. Fräulein Kreutune destroyed them *with the ease of a child plucking the wings off an insect out of curiosity*. I'm guessing they haven't sent anything else after us because their priorities have greatly changed."

"…But what exactly happened?"

"I don't know."

Kamijou slowly sat up.

It had felt like something had happened within his body just before he had collapsed.

As if spitting out the words, Thor said, “We regained control of our bodies once I used a high voltage current to destroy the foreign substance in our bodies. It was something like an organ transplant rejection. It’s possible she stuck body tissue into our bodies that was too small to see with the naked eye.”

“How did she destroy the Calculate Fortress?”

“I haven’t exactly had a chance to carry out a thorough examination of the site. …But it may have been something similar. Basically, she carries out destruction by sending microscopic tissue into the target. If the target is an organism, it experiences rejection. If the target is inorganic, the tissue expands from within, tearing it apart. Something like how water pipes burst when the water freezes.”

“…”

“But I haven’t the slightest clue regarding *the fundamental issue of what she is controlling*.”

“Eh? But you said she was controlling body tissue, right? And doesn’t that explain how she doesn’t die no matter what? So couldn’t she just be an esper that can control her own body on a level beyond what a normal human can?”

“I doubt ‘not dying no matter what’ should be taken at face value. There has to be more to it. And if there is some other trick, I doubt it’s something so plain. In all likelihood Fräulein Kreutune’s true identity *goes beyond simply not dying*. I think there has to be some unthinkable law lying at the base of it all.”

That was Fräulein Kreutune.

Without any preparations or planning, she had broken through the armor of the impregnable windowless building, knocked out Kamijou Touma and the Lightning God Thor, and smashed the defensive weapons of Academy City.

“Are you wondering whether we even need to protect her?” asked Thor mockingly. “Do you not want to help someone unless they’re weak enough to make you want to protect them? Do you not want to help someone unless you’ve had their special past and situation explained to you? Do you not want to help someone unless they’re cute enough to empathize with? Do you not want to help someone unless you’ve talked with them and become friends? …Come on now, Kamijou-san. *Is that the kind of person Kamijou Touma used to be*?”

“You’re right,” spat out Kamijou while still feeling pain from the creaking of his ribs. “If that’s what decides whether I help someone or not, then I can’t just sit here worrying about it. I need to hurry up and befriend Fräulein Kreutune. And it doesn’t matter if she is willing to pay any attention to me.”

Kamijou had a lot to think about.

But his gaze was sucked toward the windowless building as if to cut off those thoughts.

More accurately, his eyes were drawn to the deep darkness lying within the large hole in the supposedly impregnable armor.

It tempted him.

Kamijou himself did not know what seemed to be inviting him in, but he could feel there was something in that hole.

“Don’t get greedy,” said Thor whose gaze was also turned toward the large hole. “That is clearly a detour. It leads away from the main path. I don’t know what lies within, but it is not something that will be truly exposed to the light of day simply by blowing a hole in the outer wall. *This invitation is a bluff*. If we carelessly step inside, we will be devoured.”

“I know…”

At that moment, two paths lay before Kamijou and Thor.

Would they head away from the windowless building and chase after Fräulein Kreutune?

Or would they head into the windowless building and search out a great mystery of Academy City and possibly of the entire world?

Fortunately (if you want to call it that), they already had a clear objective.

“Fräulein Kreutune is our top priority. Let’s head after her.”

“Good. That way you won’t end up like a damsel in distress from some old story.”

It was not simply because he had kept Kamijou from being swallowed up by the darkness that Thor seemed so relieved.

He was not sure if he himself could have resisted the temptation had he been alone.

Even though he was well aware setting foot inside would almost certainly lead to death or an even more tragic fate.

“Which way did Fräulein Kreutune go?” asked Kamijou.

“Probably in the direction those explosions are coming from.”

“Do you think Gremlin and Ollerus’s group have noticed?”

“They would have to be pretty damn stupid to not have noticed that *something* is happening.”

That meant there was one thing they had to do.

They had to secure Fräulein Kreutune as quickly as possible.

Part 2

Meanwhile, Fräulein Kreutune watched a takoyaki stand while sitting with her arms around her knees.

Due to the preparations for the Ichihanaransai, the restaurants and cafes targeting students were lively even past the normal curfew. In addition to the normal restaurants, roadside stands had been set up that sold food at exorbitant prices. Basically, they were the type of shops that were characteristic of festivals.

As 80% of Academy City’s population was made up of students, the stand was being run by a part-time worker who appeared to be of high school age.

And that meant he was supposed to be helping his school prepare for the Ichihanaransai. As such, he did not want to be spotted by any of his classmates. People who did what he was doing during the Ichihanaransai were labeled “traitors”.

The way the boy used the sharp end of an awl-like tool to quickly rotate the round food on a metal sheet must have sharply stimulated Fräulein Kreutune’s curiosity. Her eyes had been glued to the stand for a while.

Meanwhile, the student working at the stand thought to himself.

(Come to think of it, I’ve never seen takoyaki with cream or chocolate inside. Is it just that no one wants a taiyaki-style revolution? …Wh-who is she?)

Takoyaki was a mysterious food that you thought you knew all there was to know about, but a closer inspection revealed a surprising number of mistakes in your preconceptions and assumptions. The student worker had long thought takoyaki was cooked using a single one of those awl-like tools (he did not know the proper term for it), but he had learned that two were used when he observed the kitchen of a chain store.

He had also confused normal takoyaki with the ones meant to be sold in a convenience store and therefore thought the insides were supposed to be fully cooked. That had very nearly led him to a major failure.

The student worker naturally found it odd how Fräulein Kreutune was staring at him, but he could not stop his work as the takoyaki on the metal plate were approaching completion. However, it may have had more to do with subconsciously trying to maintain his peace of mind by continuing with that familiar work.

(Wh-what? Is she hungry??? But I can't just give her some.)

Handing out one or two would not be too much of an issue business-wise, but it would be a problem if others saw and started asking for some too.

But then the boy realized that his guess had been wrong.

Fräulein Kreutune's hands began to move slightly as she sat crouched down on the ground. Eventually, the boy realized she was imitating the motion of his hands as he rotated the takoyaki. At first, the movements were clumsy, but they gradually grew more adept. She was not actually holding anything, but the gentle, curving motion of her pantomiming fingertips almost made it look like she was holding that special tool.

(Come to think of it, who is she? She's dressed oddly… Isn't she cold??? Was she being fitted for some kind of Ichihanaransai costume?)

And then…

"Hey!! You over there!!" shouted a deep male voice.

The student worker jumped, turned around, and jumped again. The man who had shouted was a fully equipped Anti-Skill member. And he was accompanied by 3 others. That group of 4 was enough to stop a convenience store robbery in ten or so seconds.

For an instant, the student wondered if his "betrayal" in working during the Ichihanaransai preparations was in violation of some law, but he soon realized he was mistaken. The group of four surrounded Fräulein Kreutune.

One Anti-Skill member pulled out a radio and contacted someone.

"This is definitely her. We're about to restrain her."

"…"

The boy could tell something had been said on the other side of the radio, but he could not make out what.

"What? That isn't in our jurisdiction. Why would we take her there? If you aren't going to give us a reason, we aren't going to do it! She already destroyed 4 unmanned attack helicopters. It would be safest to transport her the shortest distance possible!!"

"…"

“Wait. Please wait. Listen. Standard procedure is to take her to our branch office. Can you please just tell us why we can’t do that? If we don’t get an acceptable answer, we’re just going to follow standard procedure.”

Anti-Skill had an aura of intimidation that seemed like a super evolved version of the aura given off by a PE teacher, but that aura seemed to double while they were arguing amongst themselves.

The student worker began to tremble for no real reason, but Fräulein Kreutune did not look particularly concerned despite being the target of their hostility. She only tilted her head in puzzlement.

(…Wh-what? Is she an industrial spy disguised as a visiting diplomat or something?)

The Ichihanaransai was primarily an inward event for other students, but it was not unusual for high-ranking officials from important cooperative institutions to visit the city for the festival. And there were rumors of the occasional person disguising him- or herself as such an official, but…

Once the boy’s thoughts reached that point, he saw something he wished he had not.

Fräulein Kreutune had been imitating his motions as he cooked the takoyaki, but the movement of her hands had changed to something else. This was not simply because she was so bad at the takoyaki motions that it looked like something else. It was clearly a completely different type of motion.

(Wait. That’s…)

The student worker looked over in the direction that Fräulein Kreutune was looking as she sat there with her knees up.

She was looking at the Anti-Skill members.

Due to some communications issue, those experts in firearms were arguing over the radio. Meanwhile, Fräulein Kreutune was absorbing some kind of information while watching them. And she displayed it with the movements of her hands.

It was just like with the takoyaki.

At first, the movements were clumsy.

But they increased in accuracy at a rate that accelerated as time went on.

“Anyway!! Unless you can give us a reasonable explanation or a legal foundation to do so, we are not following those instructions!! If you understand, then why don’t you send a legal expert to our branch office? How about a law school professor?”

(Not good.)

The Anti-Skill members had not noticed the change in Fräulein Kreutune's movements. And he had a feeling the small difference between noticing it and not noticing it would lead to a difference between life and death.

Due to how angry the Anti-Skill members were, the student worker hesitated for an instant over whether he should say something or not.

And that hesitation was all it took.

"Momozawa, handcuff the suspect. Yashiro, bring the truck around! We can just ignore that strange interruption. This is our-..."

The Anti-Skill member trailed off.

Fräulein Kreutune had silently stood up.

The four of them were surrounding her, so they should have been able to grab her shoulder and pin her to the ground the instant she so much as twitched. And yet...

"H-hey!!"

The one Anti-Skill member frantically let out a cry of warning, but the student worker thought something seemed off about it.

It sounded to him like someone desperately trying to argue how wonderful life is to someone who had already jumped off the platform and in front of an oncoming train.

In other words, it was an action taken much too late.

A dull noise rang out repeatedly due to the actions of that woman who had absorbed something violent from the scene before her.

Part 3

To sum it up, she was lost.

Fremea Seivelun glanced around the nighttime scenery of Academy City. She remembered as far as walking off upon spotting the fruit marshmallow stand after leaving the dentist's office, but that was it. The next thing she knew, Hamazura and Takitsubo were gone and the dentist's office was nowhere to be found.

“Honestly. Getting lost at his age. In the first place, Hamazura should be ashamed! Nyahh!” announced Fremea while striking a daunting pose along a street lit up by decorative lights.

The one who was actually lost was not aware of her own situation.

Fremea Seivelun’s dorm was in District 13 which was where a lot of the elementary school students lived. She had no way of knowing this, but a member of the new Item was always camped out at the 24-hour café near her dorm to be on the lookout for an attack from the remnants of the Freshmen.

But she was currently in District 7.

She did not often travel between school districts, and when she did, she was usually being led through the crowds while holding Hamazura’s belt. She did not have enough information to get home on her own. The human homing instinct was amazingly good at guiding drunks home, but the initial settings required for that homing instinct to function had never been inputted into Fremea.

“In the first place, I am hungry…but I cannot just abandon Hamazura while he is lost. I need to carry out my role as the big sister and go find him!!”

As Fremea put all her energy into making that mistaken decision, she looked over at a map of District 7 posted nearby.

But that map was hardly going to tell her where Hamazura and Takitsubo were, plus she did not even know where she was herself. Nevertheless, she nodded twice as if it had told her all she needed to know.

And then she made another announcement.

“If I walk in a big circle around this area, I’m sure to run into Hamazura!!”

She seemed to think that was the fastest way to cover the wide area of District 7, but it was no better than when someone lost in the forest of Aokigahara thought it would be best to just head in one direction. If that was all it took, getting lost would not be such a big deal. Also, Fremea had not seen what the scale of that map was.

And so Fremea Seivelun the missile girl looked away from the map and took her first step.

And in that first step, she collided with someone.

“Nyahh!!”

“Wh-what? What? says Misaka as Misaka shouts in surprise. …Ah!? Misaka found a lost child!!”

“I-I am not a lost child!! Nyahh! I am the big sister!!”

The two girls received a great collection of scathing comments over the Misaka Network, an electromagnetic data network created from the identical brain wave amplitude of clones, but neither the girl aware of those comments or the one unaware of them paid them any heed.

The girl called Last Order looked up and down Fremea Seivelun and then puffed out her chest triumphantly despite the two being almost the exact same height.

“You leave Misaka no choice. As the adult, Misaka will help you, says Misaka as Misaka looks down on you to an excessive extent.”

“In the first place, I do not remember asking for help from someone who proudly puts her hands on her hips over being taller!! Don’t make fun of me!!”

“Misaka can tell you are a child from how you are trying to stand on your tiptoes. A true adult yearns for youth, says Misaka as Misaka acts like she knows what she is talking about.”

Fremea than stuck her index finger out towards Last Order and shouted out loud enough for everyone on the street to hear as if she was playing her greatest trump card.

“I wear a bra!!”

“Wha—!!!???”

Last Order used her electrical powers to create a lightning effect behind her to complement her shock. Meanwhile, Fremea seemed to feel like she had lost for having to use her greatest trump card, so she desperately continued speaking.

“And I already choose my own bras!! I know the sexy underwear department like the back of my hand! In the first place, I am on a fundamentally different level from a child like you!!”

“M-Misaka can’t let you get away with that. That was a challenge to Misaka’s genetic characteristics!! says Misaka as Misaka reaches the verge of tears!!”

The original source of her genes, Misaka Mikoto, was in a rather pitiful state when it came to chest size, but her mother, Misaka Misuzu, excelled in that category. As such, Last Order had not been robbed of all hope.

“You’re just a kid!!”

“What was that, you child!? says Misa—”

“You are in luck, lost child. I will take you home!!”

“You’re the lost one, so that is Misaka’s line!! says Misaka as Misaka insists that you let her say it all the way through to the end!!”

The two girls got into a bit of fight and grabbed at each other’s hair, but then an advertisement for a local travel show played on the large screen of a blimp floating overhead in the night sky.

“An adult woman must not be at a loss regarding how to entertain an unexpected guest. This week on Informed Ladies, we are having a special on the hidden top-rate restaurants in Academy City that do not require a reservation! For details, tune in to the urban channel on your cable TV!!”

“…”

“…”

Fremea Seivelun and Last Order stared up into the night sky for a bit.

And then they looked back down to glare at each other and made an announcement with surprising synchronization.

“We’ll see who is more informed by heading around to the famous restaurants of Academy City!!”

“We’ll see who is more informed by heading around to the famous restaurants of Academy City!!”

Once the two girls’ thoughts jumped directly to that idea, Hamazura being lost and the green onion for flavor were completely gone from their minds!!

Part 4

Sirens blared from every direction.

Red flashing lights colored the nighttime scenery, but not all the lights were the same. Most of them were from Anti-Skill vehicles, but fire trucks and ambulances were mixed in. The dark night sky behind them made it hard to tell, but quite a few helicopter ambulances were flying around as well.

But the students dealing with Ichihanaransai preparations were not concerned.

This may have specifically been because those preparations were outside of their normal everyday lives.

“What’s going on?”

“They sure are making a racket out there. Did someone bring alcohol onto school grounds or something?”

“That could explain Anti-Skill and an ambulance, but why would they send out a fire truck for that?”

“This is the Ichihanaransai, remember? The firefighters probably want to show off how useful they are. Y’know, burst into the schoolyard with a fire hose and put out a tempura oil fire or something.”

That of course was nonsense, but it was enough to satisfy the students. They seemed to mistakenly think not recognizing a threat was the same as avoiding the threat.

Students either continuing their work through the night or carrying food they had bought for their class were passing by a vending machine and bench that seemed to blend perfectly into the scenery.

But the issue was not the vending machine or the bench.

It was the brown-skinned girl with braided silver hair that was lying on the bench.

She was Marian Slingeneyer.

The drum can-shaped human called Mjölnir sat behind the bench. Both of them were official members of Gremlin, the organization that held enough power to shake the world.

“…Things sure have gotten noisy.”

Mjölnir audibly shook behind the bench. She looked somehow happy, but this was not because of the change to the situation. It was because Marian Slingeneyer had snapped out of her daze and begun to pay attention to her surroundings.

If one paid close attention to the direction the Anti-Skill vehicles were headed, a pattern emerged. If that information was more thoroughly analyzed, it was possible the center of the disturbance in the city could be determined. And it would also show this “center” was not fixed in one place. It was making irregular movements *as if it was carelessly wandering around the city*.

But…

"*Whaddya think we should do?*"

The line was delivered with the indifference of someone trying to choose between a burger shop or a soba stand for dinner, but it held quite a bit of meaning when coming from Marian Slingeneyer.

If she acted, it would not end at just one or two deaths.

She was deciding whether the ground, the landscape, the city, the culture, and history itself would be destroyed or not.

She was deciding whether everything in the scenery around her would be transformed into something grotesque and psychedelic or not.

That was the kind of question it was.

Mjölnir noisily shook in response.

She was an exception even within Gremlin because *she had actually asked to be optimized into that form*, and so she was one of the few people who felt no desire to flee when she heard Marian Slingeneyer say that. Thor held a coordinating role as well as being in charge of direct combat, so their strategy meetings inevitably headed in a dangerous direction when he was gone.

Marian Slingeneyer was like a giant rock at the top of a steep slope.

If anyone gave that rock the slightest push, it would begin rolling. And once it gained momentum, no one could stop it.

Not even the rock itself would be able to stop it.

While still lying on the bench, Marian Slingeneyer stuck one hand into her overalls. She pulled out a saw made of gold. That tool was used in her alterations to the human body. It was mostly used for the destruction of the human body required for those alterations to take place. Simply put, it was a tool used to *slice apart and remake people without killing them*.

Due to the Ichihanaransai preparations none of the students gave Marian a second glance despite the fact that she was swinging around a blade.

She was still seen as a portion of the city's peaceful scenery.

And yet…

Just the slightest push to her back and she would recreate everything around her into red and black.

"...Nope, it's still too much of a pain in the ass. I just can't work up any motivation."

The drum can clattered around as it shook, but Marian Slingeneyer went back to sleep out of spite.

Magicians would not act without an objective to drive them.

Part 5

"Momozawa and Kakita's teams were taken out? Those idiots!! Did they get greedy!? If they wouldn't try to keep all the credit to themselves, this wouldn't happen!!" shouted a woman into her radio.

She was Yomikawa Aiho of Anti-Skill.

She was located a bit away from the windowless building which stood in the center of District 7. A number of Anti-Skill vehicles were parked around her. Yomikawa and the others in Anti-Skill were supposed to be the ones to keep the peace and investigate crimes, but they were still not allowed to enter the blast site.

The scenery was divided up by blue plastic sheets.

If Yomikawa's eyes and memory were not failing her, then she was certain she had seen a large hole in the windowless building's wall before the sheets had covered it up. There had been a hole in the armor of that windowless building that was supposed to be indestructible even with the use of a nuclear weapon.

"The details of the suspect on the run are unknown, but she likely destroyed the Calculate Fortress from within and then destroyed an entire formation of unmanned attack helicopters sent out to deal with the emergency situation. We do not know whether this was done with some kind of weapon, some kind of esper power...or even with simple physical strength, so do not let your guard down. Assume the suspect's attacks can penetrate our jackets. If we spot her, do not interfere on your own! Do you understand!?"

Kamijou Touma listened in from behind a nearby vending machine.

The commotion had grown too large.

Thor sighed as he hid nearby.

“They’re probably going to set up a checkpoint soon. And we don’t have time to deal with something like that.”

“Who did Gremlin send with you?”

“It doesn’t matter. They clearly haven’t made their move yet. If anyone from Gremlin had taken action, Academy City would have already been changed more than this. They might be checking to make sure this unexpected opportunity is not a trap.” Thor clicked his tongue. “Ollerus’s group must also be doing only as much as they can while lying low. Whichever side gets their hands on Fräulein Kreutune will mean a tragic end for her. We need to find her quickly.”

“…No.” Kamijou quietly denied that statement. “If your assumptions are correct, Gremlin and Ollerus’s group must be half in doubt about the information that Fräulein Kreutune has suddenly escaped. They have yet to make any direct contact with her. …We can still fool them. If we can send out some fake information making them think it’s a trap and that they should stay away, *wouldn’t we be able to keep them away from Fräulein Kreutune?*”

“I see. What exactly would we need to do?”

“If both of us just directly gave one of the groups that advice, they wouldn’t believe us. So we need to scatter some bait before they get accurate information on Fräulein Kreutune. We need to do something near them that makes them think it must be a trap.”

The first problem they had to solve was how to escape that Anti-Skill filled area.

Thor seemed to be growing impatient and Kamijou was afraid he would begin to act violently if they did not do something soon. That brought the danger of drawing the attention of Gremlin or Ollerus’s group if they detected it. If that happened, it was all over. If they were being monitored before they could set up any tricks, they could hardly set a trap.

Kamijou tapped Thor on the shoulder and pointed at something with his index finger.

“Let’s take the standard route.”

“A fire truck?”

“Those thick firefighter outfits will cover our face and our silhouettes. They won’t be able to tell who we are or how old we are. Let’s borrow two of those to make our escape.”

Part 6

Last Order and Fremea Seivelun arrived at District 10.

It bordered District 7, so it was not difficult to reach, but the district was well known for having poor public order. There were stories of deliverymen going out of their way to avoid passing through the district on the way to their destination. That type of rumor remained even during peaceful times, so it was immediately obvious it was no place for two little girls during the night of Ichihanaransai preparations when everyone had thrown out any restraint.

If the situation was given the tagline “I will use any means necessary to save those two girls who have wandered into the dangerous District 10!!”, it would probably make a decent independent action film for a film studies group.

However, Last Order and Fremea Seivelun shared a certain characteristic.

They were incredibly oblivious when it came to their own danger.

“Heh hehhn. That parking garage over there is Academy City’s famous Food Stand Spire! says Misaka as Misaka puffs out her chest triumphantly.”

“I-in the first place, I knew that too!”

“Then do you know what the most popular restaurant in the Food Stand Spire is? says Misaka as Misaka insists on an answer.”

The simplest way of describing it was a parking garage filled with nothing but large vans and RVs. Seats and tables for customers were also set up, so the parking space was not full, but the one building still contained somewhere between 400 and 500 restaurants.

The parking garage was not airtight, but it still had an excessive number of vents and air ducts to allow the exhaust to escape. The building itself was lit by irregularly placed LED light bulbs and altogether gave off an aura of handmade junk.

The scene of all the stands lined up had no uniformity to it. It mainly gave a motley and dirty impression. Also, District 10 was well known for having the worst public order of any district. Dyed hair and shaved heads were the norm. The customers viewed scars and tattoos like normal people viewed glasses and contact lenses.

Simply put, it felt like it would be game over for Last Order and Fremea within 5 seconds of setting foot inside the building. But…

“Huh? What are some kids doing here?”

“Oh, c’mon, old man! You can’t put a place like this in a pamphlet! What if those harmless little girls end up getting mugged!?”

“You two over here! I’ll give you each a free boiled egg if you act as their bodyguards!!”

“It has to be a long way to their home, but at least keep an eye on them until they reach a large station.”

Surprisingly, most of the people seemed to be neither enemy nor ally.

It was thanks to the following ironclad rule of delinquents:

You have to be nice to cats abandoned in the rain and to little kids!!

“In the first place, the lineup of restaurants should change as we go up floors.”

“Yes, yes. The lower floors closest to the entrance draw the most customers and have the more popular junk food, and the higher floors draw fewer customers but make a living by catering to more specific tastes, says Misaka as Misaka explains the system.” Last Order raised her index finger. “But there is one restaurant that draws a lot of people despite being on those upper floors, says Misaka as Misaka gives an additional explanation.”

The parking garage had an elevator, but it did not have several of them like a department store or hotel. Since the customers were bound to get into fights if they had to wait in line for the elevator, it was banned from use. For that reason, the two girls followed the other customers’ lead and walked up several gentle slopes as they headed for the very top floor.

As they headed up, the food for sale no longer focused on appealing to everyone just as Last Order had explained. By the time they reached the top floor, restaurants like a coffee shop that’s owner wore a tailcoat and a Kaiseki stand run by a young woman in a kimono were not unusual. However, these shops were so incredibly cheap that it was hard to enjoy them without growing somewhat suspicious.

But Fremea Seivelun and Last Order were completely oblivious to this.

The two headed to the center of the top floor with Last Order primarily taking the lead.

There they found a certain stand.

The stand was made out of a small modified truck, but it did not have a kitchen space inside like all the other stands did. Some basic camping gear was spread out around the truck and the cooking was done in that open space. It was a popular restaurant, but it currently had plenty of empty seats due to lucky timing on the girls’ part.

The stand had only one cook, but he was accompanied by three girls who looked like they knew nothing of cooking or the service industry. After spending a month in District 10, it would be obvious they were hired to carry out dirty jobs in the name of being bodyguards.

But as previously stated, Last Order and Fremea Seivelun were oblivious.

One of those bodyguards had something in her mouth with a blinking bluish-white LED on the end. It looked like a nicotine free electronic cigarette, but it was actually something much more suspicious. The two small girls ignored the bodyguard as she put the item back in its case and they approached the lone cook. They pushed aside a few tables and chairs as they approached.

Last Order said, "Give me the usual! says Misaka as Misaka gets excited!!"

"…The usual? I've never seen you before. Also, you should try not to say that around this district. You'll get caught up in some illicit transaction."

The cook's voice was low and flat so as not to show any emotion.

Fremea sat down in one of the camping chairs and looked around.

"In the first place, what kind of restaurant is this?"

"Chinese."

"Nyahh. I don't see any Chinese people here."

"In this country, salt butter ramen and mild chili oil qualifies as Chinese cooking."

Last Order also sat in a chair, but retained her know-it-all expression.

"Misaka knows that this restaurant has no menu, says Misaka as Misaka reveals a hidden truth. After all, this restaurant only serves one thing!! says Misaka as Misaka jabs out her finger to emphasize this information!!"

"Only one kind of food maybe," muttered one of the bodyguards and one of the other girls stomped on her foot.

With expressionless eyes, the cook said, "Well, I'll make anything so long as you pay."

He then opened the lid of a silver stockpot and stuck a giant fork-like tool inside.

Fremea's nose twitched and she frowned at the oddly sweet smell.

"…What do they sell here?"

“Giant pieces of meat, says Misaka as Misaka immediately replies.” Last Order puffed out her chest meaninglessly. “They have the ridiculously giant pieces of meat you only see in manga!! says Misaka as Misaka goes ahead and explains even though she has never seen it!!”

“I-in the first place, you admitted you have never seen it!! Nyahh!! Nyahh!!”

And then exactly what Last Order had described appeared.

The plate was large enough for an entire family-size pizza but it had no side dishes on it. It contained nothing but a ridiculously huge chashu cutting horizontally across the giant plate. Its width was about a size larger than a store-bought jelly roll.

Last Order had the expression of someone whose improvised attempt at speaking a foreign language had actually gotten through overseas.

“See!? says Misaka as Misaka’s eyes sparkle!!”

“…In the first place, it looks like a chashu, but it has a somewhat sweet smell. Also, the outside seems crunchy. Is this the same thing you put on ramen?”

“Those are specifically made to go well with Japanese ramen. They are too greasy to eat plain,” replied the cook who was opening a sports newspaper now that his job was done.

Fremea looked puzzled.

“Th-then do you use a knife and fork…?”

“Tsk, tsk tsk, says Misaka as Misaka waves her index finger as an effective lead in.”

“In the first place, if you keep acting like a know-it-all, I will dump chashu sauce all over your clothes.”

“Wait, wait!! Misaka will give you a proper explanation, so wait!! says Misaka as Misaka begs you to stop!!” Last Order frantically brought up her hands in a meaningless defense. “I said this is like the giant pieces of meat in manga, right? says Misaka as Misaka double checks. Do you ever see them elegantly using a knife and fork to eat their ridiculous pieces of meat!? says Misaka as Misaka asks you an important question!!”

“But then, in the first place, how do you eat it?”

Last Order explained with her actions.

She grabbed both ends of the giant piece of meat with her hands and started chowing down on the middle portion.

The instant she did, time seemed to stop for Fremea Seivelun as her basic knowledge of the world crumbled around her.

And then she opened her mouth to speak as her instincts welled up within her.

“It’s just like in manga!! It’s manga meat!!”

“Didn’t I tell you? says Misaka as Misaka gives a triumphant look.”

“Nyah. I see. So this was mammoth meat…”

Despite being slightly mistaken, Fremea Seivelun began eating her own giant piece of meat.

Part 7

Kamijou and Thor made it past the circle of Anti-Skill and to a high-class hotel. They removed the firefighter suits, dumped them in a metal dumpster near the delivery entrance of the hotel, and then left.

As they walked, Thor said, “The important factors here are Fräulein Kreutune, Gremlin, and Ollerus’s group. They are all hiding within Academy City, but we have no idea where any of them are.”

“…Even Gremlin? I thought they were your comrades.”

“If we had some way to always know where the others were, I wouldn’t have been able to go behind their backs like this, would I? If we need to meet up, I can contact them. But they would grow suspicious if I constantly asked to meet up with them for no reason.”

They walked down the sidewalk next to a major road to distance themselves from the commotion. As they did, they passed by several groups of students continuing Ichihanaransai preparations through the night. When he spotted Anti-Skill looking around from atop a pedestrian bridge, Kamijou’s spine stiffened, but he came back to his senses when Thor elbowed him in the side. Getting nervous would just draw their attention.

“What about you? Ollerus contacted you, right?”

“Yeah, but we didn’t exchange contact information or anything. I don’t know where he is. He didn’t even tell me how many people he brought with him. …If I suddenly told him to stop fighting Gremlin or that there was a trap set up around Fräulein Kreutune, he would never believe me. In fact, he would just grow suspicious of where I got the information from.”

"Which means…"

"The trap has to be set with Gremlin. We know how to contact them and they trust you. If we can make them think Academy City's elite and Ollerus's group are both coming, I doubt they would approach Fräulein Kreutune until they had confirmation one way or the other."

"Yes, yes," said Thor, cutting Kamijou off. "But that leaves Ollerus's group free. It's true Gremlin's goal will not be kind to Fräulein Kreutune, but just giving her to Ollerus will not solve this. She is a cornerstone of Gremlin and Othinus's plan. Ollerus's group could very well be thinking of throwing a wrench in that plan by *killing the seemingly immortal Fräulein Kreutune*."

"If Gremlin falls for our trap, they will naturally raise their guard. …If Ollerus's group notices that change, I would think they would send out a scout. That is where we can set up *a second trap*. I don't know where they are in the city, but Ollerus's group will definitely show up when they notice that change. We can make contact then."

And if they could then give fake information to the scout acting for Ollerus's group, the entire group would lose its ability to make a proper decision.

"So we make Gremlin think they are being attacked by both the science side and Ollerus's group, and we make Ollerus's group think they are being attacked by both Gremlin and the science side?"

And then once they put up their guards and stopped moving, Kamijou and Thor could secure Fräulein Kreutune and make her disappear. That was the only way to protect her.

Thor then said, "That's quite the tightrope act. It will require bringing Gremlin and Ollerus's group quite close together. If the trap doesn't work, we could end up with a direct clash between them. And I would be surprised if Fräulein Kreutune did not end up at the center of that clash."

"The tightrope act began the moment you people set foot in the city. …Hopefully, our trap can buy us a day or at least half a day. Saving Fräulein Kreutune takes priority, but we also have to make preparations for afterwards. If we don't balance this mysterious schedule perfectly, it will all fail."

Part 8

Once they had filled their stomachs, Last Order and Fremea Seivelun left the Food Stand Spire parking garage.

And then they tilted their heads in puzzlement.

"…Which way is the station? says Misaka as Misaka tilts her head in puzzlement."

"In the first place, don't ask me. Nyahh, I thought you were informed."

"Misaka is informed! Misaka was just quizzing you!! says Misaka as Misaka is forced to explain every little thing!!"

They both had cell phones given to them by their guardians, so they could determine their current location by using the map service, but people had a tendency of not thinking of services they rarely used when they truly needed them.

Despite the poor public order of District 10, road signs were quite abundant. This was because the land there was cheap and the facilities other districts wanted to keep away were concentrated there.

However, there was no guarantee that those signs would be accurate.

Signs were commonly bent, swapped out, and otherwise made so their arrows pointed in the wrong direction.

If you asked the residents of the district why they did this, they would simply say they had no real reason. It was the same reason that people broke school windows at night.

And so…

"In the first place, District 7 is to the north, so we are sure to make our way somewhere eventually if we keep walking in that direction."

"Oh, nice idea!! says Misaka as Misaka's eyes sparkle!!"

Those two idiots charged full speed ahead along that choice that was common among lost children.

But they ran into their first problem before making it 500 meters.

They arrived at a T-shaped intersection and could not head straight forward any longer.

"…What should we do? says Misaka as Misaka checks with you just to be sure."

"Nyahh! When you don't know, you should ask someone else!!"

Despite not knowing where she was, Fremea rocketed off in an even more random direction. Last Order followed after her and Fremea spoke to a tall woman for the much too arbitrary reason of "she seemed closest".

"In the first place, which way is District 7!?"

"…?"

The woman had long silver hair.

The woman had pure white skin.

The woman swayed back and forth to mimic Fremea's motions.

The woman was being pursued by a large number of people.

And…

The woman was known as Fräulein Kreutune.

Part 9

Their plan was to set up a trap for both Gremlin and Ollerus's group.

However, they needed to make some preparations first.

Kamijou Touma and Thor headed to a certain school. Due to the Ichihanaransai preparations, they were able to freely enter without having to worry about security despite it being late at night. And for the same reason, the area was overflowing with tools.

Normally, Kamijou would never have let anyone related to Gremlin into his school. Creating that point of contact was much too dangerous. But the situation required some sacrifice. He could think of no other way of getting what he needed.

But…

"Huh? Kamijou-chan still has not come back?"

Just as Kamijou was about to pass through the school gate, he heard that voice and dashed behind a nearby tree.

Tsukuyomi Komoe, a female teacher with a height of 135 cm, and Fukiyose Seiri, the class Ichihanaransai committee member, were conversing within the school grounds.

"But according to Yomikawa-sensei, he only got caught up in a fight, so he has already been released from the Anti-Skill station."

"He knows he's supposed to be staying overnight working, but he used all the confusion to disappear! I really shouldn't have expected anything out of him!!"

The area seemed soaked with so much oil a single spark would turn it into a sea of flames.

As sweat poured from his entire body, Kamijou was certain of one thing.

He would be in serious danger if he was caught here.

The mysterious schedule he had just barely managed to build up came crumbling down.

“(…Hey! Hey, Thor!! What are you just standing there for!? Get over here and hide!!)”

“Eh? Why? I don’t see any reason to hide.”

“(It was only because you suddenly picked that fight with me that Kamijou-san’s name has fallen so low in their eyes!!)”

Kamijou decided they could not get in through the front entrance, so he dragged Thor outside the school grounds even though the other boy did not understand why. While keeping a careful eye on his surroundings, Kamijou attempted to infiltrate the school building through the back faculty entrance.

It was commonly thought that schools were scary at night, but this school was anything but silent. The classroom and hallway lights were on and plenty of people were moving about. Each class was preparing its Ichihanaransai attraction, so they were creating various pieces of art out of plywood and the hallways were hard to walk down with all the objects filling them.

However, that mixed atmosphere was filled with the excitement unique to a coming event.

Thor seemed so excited Kamijou thought he was going to start humming.

“Nice, nice. Not bad at all. I wish I had brought some spray paint with me. I feel like putting some graffiti on the walls.”

“Don’t get in such a weird mood. More importantly, *are you ready?*”

“Well, the spiritual item was destroyed by your right hand once already. I repaired it with the materials I had on hand, but that will probably only get me one more use out of it. But I think that should be enough.”

“Good. …Hm? One more use???”

“What? Is that a problem?”

If that was what Thor said, it must have been true, but something about it did not sit well with Kamijou.

Then it hit him.

He remembered getting into an argument with *someone who looked just like Misaka Mikoto* near the windowless building. So who had that been?

“Where are the computers? This is an Academy City school, so you’ve gotta have a full complement of them, right?”

“The computer lab would probably be fastest. I’m pretty sure they have an expensive business-class printer there.”

Kamijou doubted he would run into any problems as long as no one from his class spotted him, so he started hiding behind things less and less the further he got from his classroom. By the time he was in an area filled with classrooms for a different year, he did not even hide when a group of girls passed by.

“What was that? Why were those girls in track suits carrying bath buckets?”

“They were probably using a club shower room. Their hair was wet.”

“These peaceful places sure are nice. I wish I lived somewhere like this.”

“I’m *supposed* to live here! But people like you keep appearing and now I’m in danger of being held back a year!!”

The computer lab they arrived at was larger than a normal classroom and it had about 40 computers lined up within it. But most youths those days owned computers, so it was unclear just how necessary the funding spent on the computers was.

The door was unlocked and the lights had been left on.

It was probably open so students could print posters for the Ichihanaransai.

Household printers had grown more accurate, but they could still mostly only print on A4 sized paper. Machines that could print at the A2 poster size were hard to find.

“The lights are on…”

“But no one’s inside. This is our chance.”

Kamijou Touma and Thor snuck into the computer lab.

The first step in their plan was complete.

Part 10

Marian Slingeneyer held a cell phone while leaning up against the giant black drum-shaped Mjölnir.

“Hmm. I’m finding all sorts of unconfirmed information regarding Fräulein Kreutune. I don’t know if my ‘modifications’ would work on her, so you do something about it, Thor. …I’m not sure if even my Mjölnir could win in a straight competition of firepower.”

The drum can clanked around in protest, but Marian paid it no heed.

The voice speaking over the phone did not seem particularly concerned.

“Like I said, I’ve already begun taking action. …But I think they will have noticed these changes in the city, too.”

“You mean Ollerus’s group?”

“Exactly. We’re going to need concentrated firepower to capture the target. I don’t want anyone interfering during that time. That’s why I say we crush anyone who might interfere ahead of time. We need to meet up.”

“Fine, fine,” muttered Marian halfheartedly before ending the call.

The way she moved through the city with the large drum can may have looked humorous. And in fact, she drew the attention of a large number of the students running around in preparation for the Ichihanaransai. The reason no one registered them as dangerous must have because of all the cleaning and security robots that travelled around the city.

None of those students realized the truth.

The brown girl they were casually walking past was an expert in human transformation and destruction. She could easily bring about a horrifying hell of flesh and blood.

“Thor said no preemptive attacks, but this would be the perfect time to make some preparations.”

Despite knowing quite well what using her power meant, Marian Slingeneyer’s tone was blunt. She was not one to hesitate when it came to destroying the peaceful scene before her eyes.

Thor had asked her to meet him in the plaza in front of the District 7 station.

That place was a landmark well known for receiving heavy pedestrian traffic even after the last train, but the population distribution was more scattered during the Ichihanaransai preparations. It did not look too congested at the moment.

“West entrance, west entrance…hm? This should be it. Now where is Thor…?”

Marian glanced around and pulled out her cell phone when she couldn’t find the person she was looking for.

But then she froze.

Mjölnir shook noisily because she did not know why Marian had suddenly stopped moving.

Marian Slingeneyer’s eyes were opened wide and staring at a bulletin board set up in front of the station. Due to the collection of cultural festivals known as the Ichihanaransai being so close, almost everything on it was advertisements for some sort of performance or another.

But something quite different was displayed prominently in the center.

It contained a large photo of a certain girl’s face.

And it had some additional information displayed in small writing below the photograph.

It said:

Marian Slingeneyer.

This dangerous suspect was witnessed in relation to the disturbance in Baggage City. She was last seen in the Bright Stare Hotel. Please report any information on her to Anti-Skill.

“…Not good.”

Marian Slingeneyer glanced around and then moved away from the bulletin board. Large plazas like that always had Anti-Skill stations built in, so she left the plaza while making sure not to look in the direction of the station.

She was not afraid of Anti-Skill.

The core of the problem lay elsewhere.

While accompanied by Mjölnir, Marian pulled out her cell phone once more. She called Thor.

“Thor, this is very bad! My information is being displayed around Academy City. If Ollerus’s group sees that, we can no longer use the hotel we’ve been using as a hideout!!”

“Academy City and Ollerus’s group. Crushing one or the other wouldn’t be a problem, but I’d rather not deal with both at the same time. …And Ollerus’s group might take advantage of the time we spend dealing with Academy City to reach the treasure before us.”

“…”

If Ollerus’s group had picked up on how important Fräulein Kreutune was, they might try to crush Gremlin and Othinus’s plan by killing that supposedly immortal woman.

And they had not found a replacement for her.

Letting Ollerus’s group reach her first would be incredibly dangerous.

“Fortunately, I have all my tools on me. We just need to move to a different hideout. We have no proof all this information flying around the city isn’t a trap. I want a new bed so I can take my time and analyze all this.”

“Understood. The two of you stand out too much. Make sure to keep a low profile so no one will report any information on you. Even if some drunks run into you, don’t start a fight.”

Marian Slingeneyer hung up and clicked her tongue.

She nearly threw the phone to the ground, but the clattering of the drum-shaped Mjölnir just barely managed to stop her.

“But how am I supposed to find a new bed? If they have wanted posters up, my picture will have been sent out to all the hotels. …I guess I should look for an abandoned building.”

Part 11

Sitting in a department store café on one end of the station plaza, Thor hung up his phone.

“She’s begun to move.”

Thor and Kamijou Touma had led Marian Slingeneyer to the plaza in front of the District 7 station, but they had of course made some preparations beforehand.

They had created the wanted poster on the bulletin board.

Thor had disguised himself as Misaka Mikoto to approach Kamijou. He had used the same magic to take on Marian's appearance. They had then taken a photo with a cell phone camera and printed out the poster using a computer in the school they had snuck into.

If one calmly analyzed the poster, it had a number of defects and mistakes, but Marian did not know the proper Academy City format so it was enough to make her sweat.

Kamijou sat in the opposite seat, watching the plaza through the glass. He pulled out his student handbook.

"Marian's unnatural actions are sure to be noticed by Ollerus's group. And they will send out a scout. This is the only time we can set *the second trap*."

"Are you really going to do it?"

"Are you that worried about me going on my own?" Kamijou gave a light smile. "We need a trap to mislead Ollerus and the others in his group. Something to make sure they don't cross paths with Gremlin. If you went with me, Ollerus and the others would use everything they had to defeat you. That would be getting our priorities backwards. Also," he continued. "You're the only one that can recover from Fräulein Kreutune's attacks. If I take one of those attacks without you around, it's all over right there. That means you have to be our final trump card. …Anyway, hand me that pen. It's water-based, right?"

The pen had been left on the table in order to fill out the customer survey cards, but Kamijou used it to write something in his student handbook.

"If Marian is seriously on the run, she will use magic to keep any enemies away. That isn't going to be some horrible magic using humans as materials like in Baggage City, is it?"

"If she was on the attack, probably. But when on the run, she doesn't want to cause a commotion. Even someone as obsessed with transforming people as she is will be cautious here. The human body is not Marian Slingeneyer's *only* specialty. It does get the most focus because of the impact it makes, though."

"Do you have any guesses what she might do?"

"Norse mythology talks of decorations that make the wearer's body invisible. Marian can likely use something like that as she can create the weapons of the gods," said Thor.

“And there is one common factor among all magic that makes the user invisible. The magician that uses it has no way to know if they have actually been rendered invisible or not. …Ever since she entered the plaza, I’ve been adding some ‘seasoning’ of my own to the landscape so it will fail. That means you won’t lose sight of her.”

“I see,” muttered Kamijou as he wiped some water droplets from the outer edge of his iced coffee glass and rubbed them on a page of his student handbook. “Then I’ll be going. If I can’t meet back up with you, you go on ahead.”

Kamijou left the café and rode down the escalator. He exited the department store and looked around.

He spotted Marian Slingeneyer’s silver braided hair.

He took a deep breath and slowly began to follow her.

Naturally, he could not let Marian notice him. But Kamijou’s goal was not to tail Marian Slingeneyer. He actually wanted to spot someone else who was following her, so it was a rather complicated situation.

And so his main focus was not Marian; it was the area behind her.

Kamijou followed her out of the plaza, down a narrow path, and around turn after turn after turn. All the while, he kept his focus on the area around her.

If Marian’s pursuer was using some kind of magic to turn invisible or hide their presence, his attempts to find them with his five senses would be pointless, but…

(It would all be pointless if Marian Slingeneyer sensed some kind of magic power. I hope Ollerus’s group decided using magic was too dangerous.)

Marian must have been worried about being followed by Anti-Skill because she took a much more roundabout route than necessary.

After a few more unnecessary turns, Kamijou’s shoulders jumped.

Something did not seem quite right.

It was only after he turned the next corner that he realized it was the clear cover protecting the contents of a vending machine. He had seen something reflected in the cover.

Kamijou stopped pursuing Marian, cracked open the backdoor to a building, and slipped inside.

He silently closed the door and listened to the regular footsteps coming from outside.

With his back pressed up against the wall, Kamijou looked over at a nearby table. The stands and stages for the Ichihanaransai were made on the school grounds, but normal stores would also make special decorations for the occasion. That must have been why the table had a toolbox on it.

Kamijou grabbed a power drill that looked a bit like a handgun.

Meanwhile, the regular footsteps passed by the door and continued on to follow Marian.

Before the footsteps disappeared, Kamijou reached for the doorknob to the backdoor. He slowly turned the knob so as not to make any noise and opened the door ever so slightly.

He peered outside.

He saw a small back.

He saw some familiar blonde hair.

He saw someone who Thor had named as a member of Ollerus's group.

"...Leivinia Birdway..."

Despite knowing it was a possibility, actually seeing her again brought a strange pressure to Kamijou's chest.

The Hawaiian Islands. Baggage City.

She was another cause of those incidents even if not as direct a cause as Gremlin.

He could feel his consciousness grow oddly unsteady, but he could not stop there. If Marian Slingeneyer and Leivinia Birdway clashed, Kamijou's plan to trick each group into distancing themselves from each other would fail.

"..."

Kamijou tightened his grip on the power drill.

He opened the building's backdoor even further and stepped out into the narrow pathway outside.

He had already made up his mind.

And in a way, having it be her was better than the alternative.

Part 12

District 7 is that way.

If you do not know the direction, look at the stars.

It is not too far to walk.

“O-ohhhh! I recognize this area, says Misaka as Misaka is utterly impressed. Misaka thinks we found the true queen of the informed, says Misaka as Misaka is surprised by this sudden intruder.”

Last Order looked around with her eyes wide when she made it back to District 7 based on Fräulein Kreutune’s directions.

Fremea Seivelun put her hands on her hips and said, “Nyahh. That’s the problem with lost children. In the first place, I would rather you did not cause me so much trouble.”

To the very end, she did not realize she had been lost.

Meanwhile…

“…?”

The two girls had grabbed Fräulein Kreutune’s hands and dragged her along with them.

Last Order smacked Fräulein Kreutune on the back with her small palm.

“Misaka guesses she should thank you, says Misaka as Misaka looks down on you even while thanking you! By the way, what is your name?”

“My name…”

Without moving her neck, Fräulein Kreutune turned her gaze upwards with only her eyeballs. It looked less like she was trying to remember something and more like she was performing a mechanical search for a piece of information amongst a large amount of data.

“Fräulein Kreutune. That is my name.”

“Okay, now let’s exchange email addresses! says Misaka as Misaka continues on to the next mission!! Apparently, that’s a ceremony for making friends!!”

“…?”

“Nyahh. In the first place, do you have a cell phone?”

“…Cell phone…”

Fräulein Kreutune’s eyeballs rolled around to a few different odd angles, but she did not seem to be able to find a satisfying answer.

And whether she found an answer or not did not matter to Last Order or Fremea.

“In the first place, I guess it can’t be helped. Nyahh! You can borrow this!”

Saying that, Fremea pulled a vaguely egg-shaped device from her pocket. One end of the device had a string and a round metal device like a keychain attached. It was a child’s security buzzer.

Hamazura and the others had given it her in case the Freshmen attacked. It was nothing special, so it would be useless against any kind of expert interference, so the new Item did not trust it much.

Fremea arrogantly entered explanation mode.

“This uses something called GPS, so if you pull the string, it sends your current location to the cell phone registered with it! If you take this and go like this and this, you’ll be okay! In the first place, you just have to pull on the string if you want to see us. We’ll come charging out to meet you!!”

Of course, if it used GPS, she should never have gotten lost in the first place, so it was immediately obvious Fremea did not really understand how it worked.

“Oh, oh. But this doesn’t let us contact her, says Misaka as Misaka gives her objection.”

“Heh heh heh. It can actually receive simple emails for no cost! In the first place, it can receive but not reply to emails of under 150 characters from only the registered cell phone, so it comes with a lot of annoying restrictions!!”

“…?”

Fräulein Kreutune tilted her head in puzzlement as she stared at the security buzzer she had been handed.

While looking up at the woman’s face, Last Order said, “That concludes the ceremony, so now we’re friends, aren’t we!? says Misaka as Misaka checks to make sure!!”

“…Friends?”

“Nyahh. In the first place, I see no reason why we can’t be friends.”

“…Friends.”

Fräulein Kreutune tilted her head even further as she thought. Finally, her eyeballs rolled around one last time.

“Yes, understood. We are friends.”

Part 13

“And so here I am.”

Leivinia Birdway seemed to be shrugging her shoulders with her arms held out horizontally more than it did she was holding her hands up.

She continued speaking without turning around.

“You’ve changed since I last saw you. Are you no longer using the power of your right hand? Well, I will admit a power drill would be more useful at certain times and in certain situations, but could you stop pressing the tip of the drill against the back of my head?”

“Don’t move,” said Kamijou in a quiet voice from behind her. He was painfully aware of the trigger-like switch under his finger. “I know you can freely use power ridiculous enough to let you control a magic cabal. There might not be anything I could do in a straight fight. But I have the advantage here. I’ll activate the drill before you can do anything.”

“*Will you really?*” Despite facing a fate much more gruesome than being shot with a bullet, Leivinia Birdway’s muscles were not even slightly tense. “*Please don’t tell me you actually think you can kill me with something like that.*”

“…”

Kamijou did not respond and turned his gaze beyond Birdway.

Marian Slingeneyer must not have noticed them because she disappeared around the next corner.

Birdway let out a dispirited sigh like a fisherman whose catch had escaped the hook.

“I never expected you to act on Gremlin’s behalf after everything that happened. Do you really understand what you are doing?”

“If you’re asking if what I am doing is right or not, I have no idea. But at the very least, I am trying to think things through for myself.”

“You do realize you might just have been tricked into thinking that is what you are doing, right?”

“You were the one that specialized in doing that.”

“…”

Leivinia Birdway breathing stopped for a quick moment.

Kamijou continued on regardless.

“I saw that hell in Baggage City. After seeing that, I can no longer innocently trust someone like you who used me despite knowing that would happen.”

“Do you mind if I give you my thoughts on that?”

“Are you going to say that was meant to keep the damage to a minimum?” Kamijou could feel his hand holding the drill start to tremble unnaturally and he desperately tried to keep it under control. “You may have a point. Someone like you can probably carry out complex calculations that a simple high school boy like me can’t. You can probably come to the optimum answer in the shortest amount of time. Maybe all that chaos would have spread thinly out throughout the entire world leading to an even more horrible future if it had not been focused within Baggage City. That was your answer, wasn’t it?”

“Well…”

“But,” continued Kamijou, speaking over whatever Birdway was trying to say. “After seeing that, I just can’t bring myself to say it was the best answer. Kihara Kagun died. That fact brought a girl to tears! …If that happened because something went wrong, then that’s one thing. But that wasn’t the case for you!! I don’t know what you gained from causing all that to happen, but you still brought about Baggage City for your own ends. That fact does not change!!”

Kamijou started to say “How am I…” but he could feel his lips trembling.

He was shaken.

Why was that?

Was he unable to control his own anger? Was the pain of having Birdway betray him coming back to him? Or did he still want Birdway to deny it all and say it had all been some kind of mistake? Was he so shaken because he was not receiving those words he had secretly been hoping for?

Kamijou forced out the words while still not understanding his own mental state.

"…How am I supposed to unconditionally trust someone who did that!?"

Leivinia Birdway remained motionless for a bit.

Since she had her back to him, Kamijou could not see her expression.

Some time passed.

Finally, Birdway let out a small sigh and slowly spoke.

"Well, I knew this was a possibility."

"…What?"

"Just double checking my priorities. And now let me say something else: *Move that pathetic toy out of the way*. Especially if this is not a friendly visit. I am not benevolent enough to do nothing when a stranger does something like this to me."

Leivinia Birdway's tone of voice seemed to completely change like a switch had been flipped.

Kamijou Touma had never heard this tone of voice from her before.

It was cold.

It sounded like death itself.

"Let me be blunt. Are you aware you have created a situation here where you have no grounds for complaint if I kill you? You have personally thrown away the card that allows you to make an emotional plea for your life."

A conflict seemed unavoidable.

And Birdway would likely make use of something she had never shown Kamijou before.

Despite appearing to have an overwhelming upper hand in the situation, Kamijou felt his right hand stiffen unnaturally as it held the power drill. He felt as if anxiety and fear were letting out toxic components into his brain which were destroying the basic structure of his right hand.

That situation was only destroyed thanks to a shout from a third party.

"Hey! What are you doing there!?"

A powerful light washed over them and Kamijou turned in its direction without thinking. Several members of Anti-Skill were running his way. And they had no ability to immediately see through the supernatural aspects of the situation, be they psychic or magical in nature.

What it looked like to them was:

Person A was holding a dangerous weapon to Person B's back.

"Not good. Move your hand out of—!!"

Birdway reacted first.

But Anti-Skill took action before she could finish speaking.

Several gunshots rang out and Kamijou Touma felt intense pain explosively expand through his body.

It felt like a scorching object was ripping through him.

All strength left his right hand and the power drill fell to the ground. Even while he still did not understand why he had lost strength in his arm, he could feel that lack of strength spreading throughout his entire body.

He could not even work up the strength to look down at his own body.

And in the next moment, Kamijou collapsed down to the asphalt. His consciousness lost its continuity and he could only catch intermittent bits of what was going on around him.

He heard adult voices yelling in the distance.

"You…idiot!! Why did you…have live ammunition loaded!?"

"B-but I…!!"

Kamijou felt like something important was flowing out of the holes in his body like air leaking from a balloon. An uncomfortable slimy feeling covered his upper body.

He heard Birdway speaking.

"Shut…up!! …Just call…an ambulance! I…can perform first…aid. Like hell…I can trust…you!"

His vision flickered in and out.

He began to have difficulty remembering the context of his situation.

First aid had been mentioned, but all Kamijou could tell was that he was rolled onto his back. He had a feeling someone was doing something to the center of his torso, but he could not imagine what they were doing or what it had to do with healing him.

And…

He noticed something odd during the course of the first aid.

He heard a sound like paper scraping against paper.

♦

When Leivinia Birdway heard the siren of the ambulance, she stopped her bloody hands. All she had been able to do as first aid was hold a handkerchief to the wound.

The ambulance could not enter the narrow alley, so it stopped at the road outside. A number of EMTs approached, pushing a stretcher.

Birdway shouted at them.

"The bullet struck his right flank, but it came out the other side! There is no sign it injured an artery or any organs!! But some fragments of the bullet might still be inside. Don't just trust the bullet is out. Make sure to do a proper examination!!"

"Understood. Leave the rest to us!!"

"Just do your job. That should save him."

Anti-Skill started to call out to Birdway to ask about the situation. …But they froze in place when she threw a glare as sharp as a knife in their direction. If they had actually rudely called out to her, they might have been smashed to pieces by her.

Since she had used her handkerchief for first aid, she had nothing to wipe the red blood from her hands.

Birdway grimaced and started to leave. Only then did she pull something out of her skirt pocket.

It was Kamijou Touma's student handbook.

Birdway called someone using her cell phone, narrowed her eyes, and said, "Yes, yes. That's right. I met some interference but from an unexpected source. Gremlin has won over Kamijou Touma."

She flipped through the student handbook with her bloody hands.

Birdway had not performed first aid for a purely sentimental reason. Since she had been thrown off the trail of the only person who they could get any kind of hint from, she had wanted a new source of information. She had *also* had that logical reason.

Kamijou Touma had been defeated, but she knew who was behind his actions.

With that fact in mind, Birdway continued speaking

"Kamijou Touma is working with…*Marian Slingeneyer*. He has her contact information written in his handbook. I can't read the numbers though because sweat or something has made the ink run. At any rate, it seems Gremlin's base is in District 12. If we want to crush them in a surprise attack, this would be the perfect chance to concentrate our forces."

♦

After the EMTs placed him on the stretcher, Kamijou's dim vision caught sight of Birdway calling someone.

(…She fell for it.)

Kamijou did not have enough of a connection with Ollerus's group to contact one of them. And even if he had suddenly come to them with some useful information, they would have been suspicious.

That was why he had abandoned the idea of telling them directly.

He had written false information in his student handbook, made the ink of the water-based pen run, and then *intentionally lost*.

They would not have believed him if he had told them directly.

And so…

He had made it so they would steal the information from his pocket.

By making them think it was information he wanted to protect, they would believe it to be true.

However, he had not expected it to be Birdway he had to deal with and he had certainly not expected Anti-Skill to intervene and put him on the brink of death.

(Now Birdway mistakenly thinks I have a connection with Marian. The fact that we met before in Baggage City helps make that more believable. If Birdway reports this to the rest of Ollerus's group, they will likely all head to District 12 where they won't find anything.)

They had sent Gremlin and Ollerus's group in opposite directions.

It was unclear how much time that would buy them.

But for the moment at least, they had avoided an all-out war with Fräulein Kreutune in the center.

(Please, Thor. Fräulein Kreutune is on the loose. If she goes on a rampage, it will only draw Gremlin and Ollerus's group to her again.)

"Gh…bh!? Cough cough!!"

"Calm down! Hey, have you accessed the Bank yet!? If we don't know his blood type, we can't begin the transfusion. Saline can only go so far!!"

After being placed within the ambulance, the back door slammed shut, cutting off his vision of what was happening.

At almost the exact same time, Kamijou's consciousness cut out.

A shrill siren had to be blaring above him, but he was not even aware of that.

EPILOGUE

Remove the Restraints.

Install……Completion.

The day came to an end.

The preparations came to a close.

And the Ichihanaransai finally began.

"…Friends."

After parting ways with Last Order and Fremea Seivelun, Fräulein Kreutune stood alone in the night.

"Friends."

She knew the word, but it held no real meaning to her. From what could be seen in the records of the dark witch hunt and the reports on the scientific analyses carried out on her, one could guess how little connection that word had to her life.

She held a device approximately the size and shape of an egg.

That small link in her hand allowed her to call someone to her with just the pull of a string.

After thinking for a bit, her eyeballs rolled off at a strange angle.

"…Found her…"

A male voice reached her eardrums.

The moment after she detected it, she also heard the sound of compressed air being released and a drink-can-like container flew through the air and landed at her feet. With a slight gap between each one, three or four such containers flew towards her from a short distance away. Barely any time had passed when a white smokescreen burst from them. In no time at all, a thick riot suppression smokescreen had spread for around 20 meters around Fräulein Kreutune.

The smoke held anti-life form properties by stimulating the mucous membranes of the face and otherwise affected the five senses and breathing.

The mixture of chemicals was designed to also have anti-machine properties by obstructing noise and light except for ultraviolet rays at a specific wavelength.

The effects of the smoke caused the surrounding voices to echo oddly. They stabbed into Fräulein Kreutune's head with the force of surging waves.

"Capture her!! She is the #1 suspect in the attack on the chairman! We have no reason to hesitate!!"

The Anti-Skill members were wearing special masks that made them look like little grays. They charged into the smokescreen using special sensors that slipped through the gaps in the smokescreen's jamming effects.

"..."

Fräulein Kreutune remained silent all the while.

Her right hand still held the egg-shaped device.

Her eyeballs rolled in a direction that seemed odd for a response to violence.

♦

Several "darknesses" existed within Academy City, and those "darknesses" each had their own variety and depth. They each formed a single dark piece of a jigsaw puzzle that fit together to form the giant picture of Academy City's dark side.

It would be easiest to picture it as something like a swarm of winged insects covering the rotting corpse of some animal.

And some of that "darkness" held a position especially close to the board of directors that controlled the management of Academy City.

Officially, the facility was a gas turbine power plant that provided emergency power for administrative offices.

However, "he" was in that vast underground facility that spread out underneath the neat and tidy District 3.

"Hey, there. Hey, there. Hey, there. Sorry about leaving you all alone like that. Even we Kiharas had to get involved in the commotion in Baggage City," said a woman as she stepped off of an industrial elevator.

She wore a baggy lab coat over a cheap suit that was obviously ready-made.

Since it was a decoy facility, the wide area had no power generation equipment inside. The area was large enough to play a game of American football in and it contained nothing anyone could hide behind. Normally, it would have seemed a rather lonely place with just two people inside.

But that was not the case.

A thick “presence” seemed to fill the entire area.

The reason for this was quite simple.

The plain concrete of that underground facility was completely covered in white.

It looked like a spider web.

Or perhaps more like a silkworm cocoon.

It covered every inch of the walls and floor so that the original color could not be seen. The woman in the cheap suit and lab coat was walking across the floor, but it did not feel like concrete. The white ground was undulating unnaturally. Looking up at the ceiling, a number of arch-shaped constructions could be seen strung up from wall to wall or from the ceiling like loosely-hung suspension bridges.

And something existed in the center of the space.

It was not simply in the middle of the two dimensions of the floor. It was in the center of all three dimensions of the room.

A giant white sphere was supported by those many arches. The construction could be seen as either a giant collection of spider webs or a giant chrysalis. Through some gaps in it, his handsome features could be glimpsed.

Kakine Teitoku.

Dark Matter.

Academy City’s #2 Level 5.

That symbol of his power that was scattered chaotically through the vast area, seeming to cover every inch, could likely not be so much as scratched even with standard machine tools.

Not long before, Kakine had been hooked up to a life support device due to the majority of his body being destroyed, and he had been used to create various weapons at the hands of one of the Kiharas. However, things had changed once a means of creating his own organs with his power had been constructed.

As Kakine's Dark Matter had begun to spread explosively and envelop an entire Kihara laboratory, those who took the situation seriously had sealed him up inside.

The woman understood that situation.

And yet she said, "It seems a toy of the chairman's has escaped. Anti-Skill cannot stand up to it. Information has been blocked, but I would like your help to control this confusion."

"..."

He did not respond.

Only the glint of his eye could be seen peeking through a gap in the spider web or cocoon.

"Yes, yes. Of course I have my own reasons. And letting you loose in the city is a rather large risk. But I see no reason why I personally should be concerned about that. In fact, if you can do enough to destroy the Kihara scenario, that would be a huge help in increasing my desire to continue my research."

"..."

"Simply put, just do it however you want. That is the general consensus among the Kiharas. Do you understand the situation?"

She received no reply.

Instead of words, the ground below the woman's feet shook. The white ground had already been undulating unnaturally, but now it began to writhe as if emulating the sea.

(...I see.)

The woman smiled silently.

(Now that he has replaced his own organs with his power, Kakine Teitoku no longer distinguishes between his actual body and the parts fabricated from his power. You could say everything filling this space is now Kakine Teitoku.)

In a way, that may have been similar to acquiring immortality. Or perhaps it should be interpreted as taking the invisible thing referred to as his "life" or his "soul" and diluting it within a larger form.

Academy City's #1 Level 5 could be said to carry out complete destruction as an established individual, and that woman's curiosity as a researcher knew no bounds when it came to comparing those top two Level 5s.

Destruction and production.

Between those two concepts, the #1 ruled over the destruction side of things. The woman in the cheap suit and lab coat could not help but smile because she felt like she could see some truth about the essence of science in that fact.

As a member of the science side, she was not about to casually acknowledge the existence of supernatural beings like god or the devil, but at times during her long history of pursuing scientific research, she felt like she was seeing god make some kind of morbid joke.

"Anyway, do this however you like. We Kiharas welcome science like you. No matter what result it brings."

♦

Meanwhile, the other side of the destruction and production duality, Accelerator, let a displeased scowl onto his lips.

He and Yoshikawa Kikyou had used every means at their disposal to search for Last Order after she suddenly disappeared. Accelerator had even leaped from building to building through the dark night. In the end, they had found nothing. When they decided to head back to the apartment, they found Last Order eating some chocolate she had found hidden in a kitchen cupboard. (It belonged to Yomikawa Aiho. She used it to quell her anger when her cooking did not go the way she wanted.)

"…Where the hell have you been?"

"Mgh!! Listen, listen! Misaka made some new friends—Ow!? says Misaka as Misaka fails to understand why you are suddenly karate chopping her!!"

After a full barrage of karate chops, Accelerator let go of his cane and collapsed onto the living room sofa looking annoyed.

Yoshikawa pulled a carton of vegetable juice from the refrigerator and asked, "What was that about friends?"

“Misaka met this blonde brat and challenged her to a competition! Then we had a competition over some delicious dinner. Oh, and then this person showed us the way back to District 7, says Misa—”

“…”

“…”

While Last Order’s warning sensor rarely functioned, even she stopped talking when she detected that unnatural silence.

“What was that about dinner?”

“…So you went out and ate on your own?”

The other two had not had a bite to eat due to wasting all that time looking for her!!

♦

On the other hand, Fremea Seivelun was still lost.

“Ah! Awah! I don’t know how to get from District 7 to District 13!!”

But Fremea still refused to admit she was lost. She decided it was everyone else’s fault for not telling her how to get home.

Also, she was just plain exhausted.

It was around midnight, so she was not sure she had ever felt so tired.

“Nyahh. I guess this is fine.”

Fremea lay down on top of a bench in the station plaza and shut her eyes.

Even if she had had the exceptional experience of being targeted by the Freshmen of Academy City’s dark side, it certainly seemed that extremely sloppy personality of hers invited in unneeded trouble.

♦

The darkness writhed.

When Hamazura Shiage and Takitsubo Rikou learned that Fremea Seivelun had still not returned to her dorm in District 13, they ran back out into the night of Academy City. They did not even know where, why, or how Fremea had disappeared.

With its leader Kuroyoru Umidori out of the picture, they thought the dark side organization known as the Freshmen had been stopped, but it was possible some remnant was still active and still targeting Fremea.

And…

Mugino Shizuri and Kinuhata Saiai had a different job to deal with.

They were cleaning up the apartment.

“What were you even doing that made everything so super messy? Half the balcony is melted.”

“I was cooking in the kitchen and it made a human. She talked back to me, so I tried to blow her away without thinking.”

“?”

Kinuhata did not understand what Mugino meant, but she did not press for further information.

There were various types of high level espers, but Mugino Shizuri had an exceedingly high output with very little control over it. She was ranked at #4 despite having greater destructive power than the #3 because the application of her power was lower.

But with the amount of power she held, it was lucky someone did not end up dead every time she sneezed.

Mugino sighed.

“Well, I need to test out various movements of my fingers for the periodic maintenance of my fake arm. Cleaning up has a lot of fine movements as well as heavy lifting, so it should function as a decent test.”

“You say that, but that phonebook-sized cookbook is getting super squished there! Is that your fake arm acting up or are your emotions getting out of control!?”

Kinuhata decided letting Mugino help clean the apartment would only lead to turning the entire interior to rubble, so she suggested Mugino take a rest.

Mugino opened the refrigerator, noticed they were out of mineral water bottles, and headed out to the convenience store.

It happened when she was halfway there.

She ran into one of Academy City's "darknesses" as it writhed through the night.

"?"

She first heard a footstep.

The area was mostly filled with apartment buildings, so it was not lit up by the usual neon lights. The only light sources during the middle of the night were the streetlights. That was why it was not too surprising that she could not see who was walking towards her from up ahead.

It was something else that bothered Mugino about the situation.

And the next piece of information arrived before she could figure out what exactly it was that bothered her.

"What's this? What's this? In the end, you look a lot different from when I last saw you."

It was a high-pitched soprano voice.

It was a voice Mugino recognized.

"Has a lot happened while I've been gone? Well, whatever. In the end, it doesn't matter to me what happens when I'm not around."

It was the voice of a girl who Mugino had once ripped in two.

It was the voice of someone who obviously should not be there.

"But…"

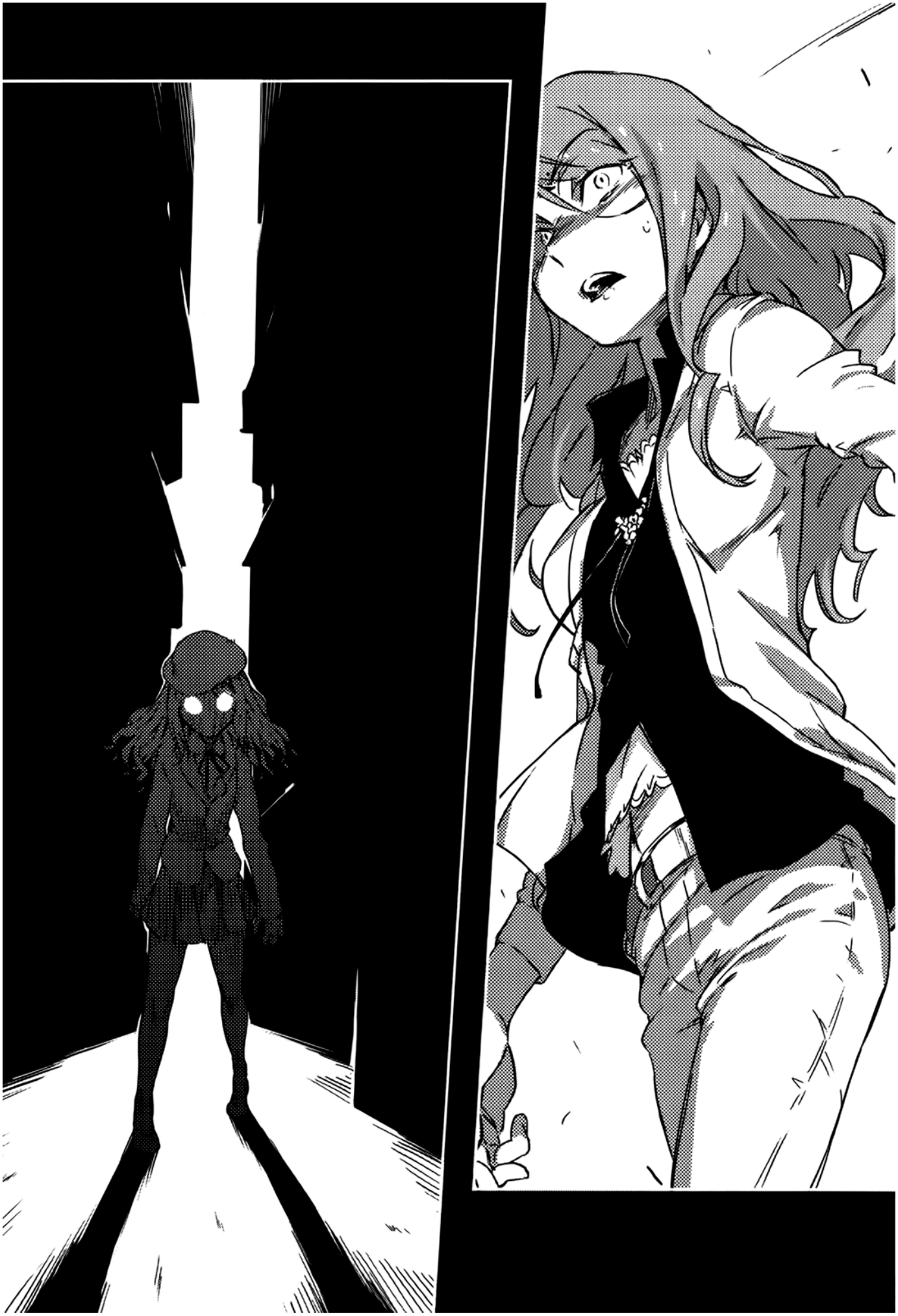
She had long wavy blonde hair. She had skin as white as a doll. She had a short, compact figure. She always wore a beret, liked to wear miniskirts, and had a habit of covering her legs with stockings.

Those where the features of someone who had been lost.

And they were the features of the person that appeared in Mugino's field of vision as the footsteps approached.

"…Fren…da…!?"

"In the end, it doesn't matter if you've come to terms with it. That is no reason for my anger to disappear!!"



Cendrillon, a girl who had become a fair bit smaller due to Mugino Shizuri getting the quantities wrong, leaned up against a vending machine in District 7 of Academy City.

Due to the Ichihanaransai preparations, the sounds of do-it-yourself construction could be heard throughout the city. Costumes for haunted houses and cafes also had to be made, so most schools had classrooms filled with the equipment needed for making clothes.

Cendrillon had snuck into one such school and made herself a dress.

It was the symbol of her power.

It was the cornerstone of her transformation.

It was the first step towards letting a completely normal-looking little girl borrow the magic power needed to overpower others.

(A lot of people are still hanging around Kamijou Touma, and they're probably all giving him *edited information* in order to have him use his right arm for their ends.)

She did not blame them for that.

Cendrillon was not Kamijou Touma's ally.

She had but one goal.

She wanted to apply decisive damage to Gremlin for having deceived her back in Hawaii.

She would use anyone to achieve that goal and she would ally herself with anyone to achieve that goal.

(Gremlin is thinly spread out across the entire world map, so I would likely never find them no matter how hard I searched. But they have approached Kamijou Touma. If I follow that boy around, Gremlin is sure to be skulking nearby.)

She had successfully made her way into Academy City and acquired a means of attack.

Now it was time she took action.

♦

"I suppose you could call it miraculous. Also, Anti-Skill's training must have stuck with them even in an emergency situation like that," said a frog-faced doctor to a nurse. He had just finished an emergency late-night surgery. "The bullet missed any vital areas and it came out cleanly. Well, as long as he rests, his condition should stabilize. But if he starts moving around, I can make no promises."

Kamijou Touma was inside the ICU which had one wall made of glass so any small changes to the patient's condition could be seen from outside and no germs could find their way in. His body was covered with electrodes, he had a mask over his mouth to supply him with oxygen, and he had an IV tube sticking into his right arm at about the elbow.

The vital signs displayed on the screen were stable, but vitals that were too stable were not necessarily a good thing in medicine. That made it seem the patient was not conscious.

"Once his condition stabilizes, he will be handed over to Anti-Skill, so preparations are being made for that. But, well, I wonder if he will end up being treated a suspect or a victim in this situation."

Lights out had passed, so the hallway had only the bare minimum of illumination. The footsteps disappeared down that hallway.

After waiting to make sure no one was there, Kamijou Touma slowly opened his eyes.

"..."

He wanted to immediately throw away the mask, pull off the electrodes, and pull out the IV tube, but the doctors would come running to the ICU if there was any oddity in his vital signs. First, he had to check to see how much he could move.

(Gh...!!)

He only put a little bit of strength into his abs in an attempt to sit up, but a dull pain exploded inside his body. It felt like he was holding a liquid in with only a small membrane. He felt like something would burst and blood would begin flowing out if he forced himself to move.

But that did not change the fact that the situation regarding Fräulein Kreutune was still a tightrope act.

Gremlin, Ollerus's group, and Fräulein Kreutune's own movements.

None of the problems had actually been solved.

He did not have the time to be sitting around resting.

(I don't think I can avoid reopening my wound... I probably won't last long this time.)

His breathing was shallow within the oxygen mask.

If he left the ICU, he faced a very real danger of simply collapsing somewhere in the city. And there was no guarantee that he would be brought back to the hospital alive. Also, the odds were good that he would end up forced into a literally life-or-death battle with magicians that could take on the entire world on their own.

He had a very real danger of dying.

That was not something a normal high school student was used to dealing with and the feeling spread from the center of his spine and out to every inch of his body.

Kamijou held his breath for a moment.

And after he truly thought about that fear…

He took his next action.

♦

By the time the frog-faced doctor detected the abnormal vital signs and ran back to the ICU, the bed was empty. The IV tube and the various electrodes were sitting discarded on the bed.

At the same time, a buzzer went off in the hospital security room indicating an emergency door had been opened.

The security camera records showed what looked like a boy wearing a hospital gown.

And the doorknob was covered in blood.

♦

Various people held various motives.

Various people were in various circumstances.

But the time was the same.

“Today” came to an end, and “tomorrow” arrived.

The preparations for the Ichihanaransai, the giant assembly of cultural festivals carried out by every school in Academy City, finally came to an end.

This was where it all started.

The Ichihanaransai finally began.

♦

Biometric confirmation complete. Validating connection.

Welcome back, Aleister-sama.

Reading Thoth 78 artificial intelligence is beginning the inputted task.

Beginning discussion regarding the problem of Fräulein Kreutune.

Fräulein Kreutune's identity is still effectively unknown.

Genetically speaking, she can only be called a normal human.

Since humans and gorillas are genetically only 2% different, it is odd that she falls into the category of a human.

With the body she has, it would be less surprising if her DNA formed a triple helix.

Categorically, Fräulein Kreutune would likely count as belonging to the science side, but she belongs to a different system than the psychic powers developed in Academy City.

To specify, she is not an esper that causes various phenomena using quantum theory based around their Personal Reality.

She is a life form that does not possess a Personal Reality that is supported by what is known as the mind or the ego.

Her thought patterns may be similar to an even more simplified version of an insect.

Hot or cold. Sweet or bitter. Damp or dry.

All of those sorts of conditions are scanned and the direction that leads to the most suitable environment is chosen. Such decisions are piled on top of each other one after another and it gives the impression that she is "thinking deeply".

However, Academy City psychic powers are not controlled with just the brain. The entire physical body controls them.

Fräulein Kreutune's thoughts are overly simplified and yet her physical body is overly optimized. That imbalance is estimated to be what gives her such unthinkable characteristics.

(Link to a different topic found. For the results to an experiment showing destroying the mind of a human with normal thought patterns does not produce these same effects, please see [this].)

On the other hand, there is no reason for her to remain in a single form or property.

Or rather, it is estimated it would be natural for her to be constantly changing to conform to the situation.

Conforming to the situation.

To put it another way, the keyword related to Fräulein Kreutune's transformation is estimated to be "learning" by scanning her surrounding environment.

It does not matter whether that surrounding environment is good or bad.

Once she absorbs a certain level of information, Fräulein Kreutune will likely transform into some other form regardless of what sort of information that is.

By acquiring a massive amount of information, she will grow from a collection of continuous thought processes even simpler than an insect's to a more complex and flexible thought process. In the process of that growth, she will likely experience a great change.

Most likely, she will become something that exceeds what can be referred to as "Fräulein Kreutune".

Perhaps it can be referred to as eclosion.

Just as there is a great change between a larva and an adult insect, Fräulein Kreutune's transformation conceals the possibility of reversing the position of prey and predator.

If the position of the hunter and the hunted are reversed, the construction of the food chain will collapse and incredible damage will be done to the current culture that is centered on mankind's use of science.

Aleister-sama, by both physically and informationally isolating Fräulein Kreutune, you had stopped her from learning.

That was not a mistake.

(Link to a different topic found. For information regarding the destroyed portion of the windowless building's outer wall and the honeycomb-shaped inner wall alone successfully retaining the airtight state, please see [this].)

However, from the standard amount of information Fräulein Kreutune can see or hear, it is estimated to take a very, very long time for her to acquire the massive amount of information required for the transformation.

It would take approximately 2300 years. Given Fräulein Kreutune's characteristics, that is not an impossible length of time, but it is not a pressing matter at the moment.

The problem is that this modern society contains a few different methods of obtaining information more efficiently than simply seeing or hearing it. Be certain she does not find a means of accessing Academy City's Bank.

On top of that, a more pressing problem has presented itself.

Fräulein Kreutune has come into contact with Last Order, the command tower of the Misaka Network.

If Fräulein Kreutune detects the Misaka Network and uses Last Order's brain to take control of it, that 2300 years can be reduced to a mere 3 seconds.

Also, as Fräulein Kreutune learns from the environment and changes her properties based on that, it is likely she can eat a human's brain and reproduce the brain's structure within herself to acquire its properties.

If she deems doing so is necessary, any personal circumstances are estimated to not be enough of a factor to stop her true nature from taking over and eating the brain.

In other words, she will not spontaneously stop acquiring new properties.

To be blunt…

It is estimated that Fräulein Kreutune will acquire the properties needed for the eating and absorption and subsequently begin taking action to eat the target's brain within 2 hours.

AFTERWORD

To those who have bought each novel one at a time, it's been a while. To those who bought them all at once, welcome.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

This is the fifth volume of the New Testament series. This volume is a story about the Ichihanaransai that has only ever been mentioned in the past. Gremlin, Imagine Breaker, how Ollerus and Othinus relate to each other, and more. This one has pieces of explanations about a lot of the major themes of New Testament.

After his bitter experiences in Hawaii and Baggage City, this volume has Kamijou Touma standing in a position where he wants to trust people but cannot blindly trust people. Ollerus, Birdway, and Thor. There are plenty of people nearby he could ask to explain the situation to him, but he has now realized simply listening to what they say is not enough.

When faced with the question of what to do about people who do not bring their honest beliefs into play and instead calmly deceive him, Kamijou has chosen to deceive them right back.

If he can succeed in that, I get the feeling he will have taken another step in his growth as a person. But these are people who standard methods never seem to work on. Will they really allow that boy's growth to proceed quite so easily?

I give my thanks to my illustrator Haimura-san and my editor Miki-san. The festival preparations meant there were a lot of construction tools and pieces of plywood lying around, so that theme must have been a lot of trouble with all the small details in the background and the difficult atmosphere to express. I am thankful as always.

And I give my thanks to the readers. What did you think of having the story back in Academy City for the first time in a while and having a school event featuring as one of the themes? I hope you will stick around for the next volume as well.

It is time to close the pages for now while praying that the pages of the next book will be opened.

And I lay my pen down for now.

By the way, do not forget that a main theme was seen in the prologue.

-Kamachi Kazuma